

Chapter 4: The Diplomacy of James Baker Secretary of State:

Individual level

The US government faced dilemma of peace in the Middle East and relationship with Israel. Because of powerful Israeli lobby in the US, Israel had been America's top ally in the Middle East. Daniel Moynihan the US ambassador to the UN announced that the US "declares that it does not acknowledge, it will not abide by, it will never acquiesce to this infamous act" at the moment when the "Zionism is racism" resolution was adopted in 1975 (as cited in AIPAC, 1990). On the other hand, repealing the resolution might end the opportunity to convene a Middle East peace conference. Then Secretary of State James Baker (1995) was a key figure to guide peace in the Middle East and the revocation to success, and wrote:

The real story of how Madrid came to fruition is a rich tale of determination, false starts, personal and political courage, blind alleys, perseverance, misjudgments, lost tempers, endless negotiations, scores of creative compromises, and both good faith and bad (p. 488).

4.1 From Day One to the Gulf War

Born from a wealthy Texas family in 1930, James Addison Baker III was educated at Princeton University and practiced law in Huston from 1957 to 1975. Despite being originally a Democrat, after decades of a personal relationship with George H. W. Bush, Baker became his close political associate and served as campaign manager, chief of staff at the White House, and secretary of the treasury. In January 1989, when Bush took office, Baker was appointed Secretary of State. During

his tenure, Baker had enjoyed firm support and trust from the president.¹

“From day one,” Baker (1995) wrote, “the last thing I wanted to do was touch the Middle East peace process” (p. 115).² Baker had seen that his predecessors’ involvements in the Middle East issue left a bitter taste in their mouth. From Baker’s point of view, neither Israel nor Arabs desired to engage in a real peace, particularly based on the American guideline – UN Resolutions 242 and 338.³ Therefore, despite his belief that the US should act as a world leader, Baker thought shuttle diplomacy would be a wasted investment. Nevertheless, because of American vital interests in the Middle East as well as the political power of the American Jewish community, Baker did not have a choice but search for a mutual peace plan that Israel and the Palestinians could work with.

The Israel government knew that their political honeymoon with a pro-Israel secretary of state George Shultz was heading for its end (Arens, 1995). In fact, Baker had supported the US’s Airborne Early Warning and Control (AWACS) sale to Saudi Arabia in 1981, which Israel opposed, and criticized Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, as White House Chief of Staff. In addition, Baker’s Texas background made Israel skeptical about his intentions. While Baker saw Israel as a loyal ally and strategic partner, Baker recognized that there would be no real peace unless Israel would voluntarily withdraw from the Territories that Israel had occupied since the 1967 war.

At his first meeting with Yizhak Shamir Prime Minister of Israel on April 5, 1989, Baker (1995) told Shamir that “we want to take what you have and market it with the

¹ G. Bush (1999) said, “Jim was perhaps my closest confidant during my political days. I trusted him completely” (p. 11).

² Reagan advised to Baker that “the Middle East is insoluble. Stay away from it!” (as cited in Baker, 1995, p. 115).

³ Ambiguity remains in Resolution 242, which states, “Withdrawal of Israel armed forces from territories occupied in the recent conflict” (UN, 1967, para. 5). It did not explicitly mention *all the territories* occupied during the 1967 war.

Arabs... but you have to give us something” (p. 119).⁴ Shortly after the meeting, Shamir presented his peace plan, calling for elections in the Territories to choose non-PLO Palestinian representatives who would negotiate peace and autonomy with the Israeli government in accordance to the Camp David agreements. While Baker felt it was a weak plan and no more than general procedures for the elections, Baker gave Israel “unqualified support” (Arens, 1995, p. 68).

On May 22, at an annual AIPAC conference, Baker addressed the renunciation of the UN “Zionism is racism” resolution. Nevertheless, Baker criticized Israeli occupation in the Territories. Shamir later told Israel radio that he did not see any connection between settlements and the peace process (IMFA, 1993a).

It was time for the Arabs to come up with their own initiative. On September 15, Egyptian President Mubarak proposed his own ten-point peace plan, calling for “land for peace” formula, the recognition of East Jerusalem as a part of the Territories, and an end of all settlement activities. Baker began to intensify American diplomacy to bridge the gaps between two proposals.

On September 28, Baker met with Israeli and Egyptian Foreign Ministers in New York to find common ground. Knowing that Israelis would never talk with the PLO, Baker agreed to the absence of the PLO in peace process. In fact, Baker’s new five-point plan was almost identical to the Israel’s peace initiative. The Israel coalition government was divided on the Baker plan. Whereas Labor immediately accepted the Baker plan, Likud demanded additional guarantees from the US.⁵ After series of negotiations with Israel, Baker received a reliable piece of news that Shamir had come to agree to the Baker plan in principal. However, before its ratification by the Knesset,

⁴ Personal difference between Shamir and Baker, often described by media, was: “a man of principle who is incapable of being practical” and “a man totally lacking in principle who cares *only* about being practical,” respectively (Baker, 1995, p. 119).

⁵ On October 17, Bush asked Shamir by phone, “What’s your plan for implementation of your *own* plan?” (as cited in Baker, 1995, p. 125)

the legislature of Israel, Baker and Bush's public remarks angered Shamir.⁶ On March 15, Shamir prompted to conduct a vote of no confidence in the Knesset, dissolving the Israel government, and later Israel rejected the Baker plan. Baker felt betrayed. Despite Baker's effort to pressure the Arabs to accept Shamir plan, Shamir was not enthusiastic about embracing his own plan.

On June 13, Baker was frustrated at the inflexibility of the new Israeli government. "I have to tell you that everybody over there should know that the telephone number is 1-202-456-1414. When you're serious about peace, call us," Baker (1995) announced (p. 131). The peace process had reached impasse, at least until the end of the Gulf War.

4.2 From the Gulf War to the Madrid Peace Conference

The Gulf War had opened window of opportunity for the Middle East peace. As the result the end of the Gulf War, the Bush administration enjoyed American credibility and domestic support. Learning from the previous failure, Baker's postwar vision was based on the concept of parallel reciprocity and the two-track approach. Since neither side wanted to compromise first, each side needed to provide something that the others want as confidence-building measures (CBMs). Then, Israel, Palestinians, Syria, Egypt, and Jordan would attend a ceremonial conference which would be followed by the direct talks between Israel and each of the Arabs.

On March 8, 1991, visiting King Fahd of Saudi Arabia in Riyadh, Baker shared an idea of CBMs that both the Saudis and Israelis might consider, such as an end of

⁶ On March 1, Baker testified that his demand that Israel must cease new Jewish settlements in the Territories before the US guarantee for \$400 million housing loan for Soviet Jewish immigrants (Gerner, 1991; Slonim, 1998). Moreover, on March 3, Bush addressed at a press conference that "the foreign policy of the United States says that we do not believe there should be new settlements in the West Bank or East Jerusalem" (as cited in Baker, 1995, p. 128) Although these were long-standing American policy, Shamir was angry at US pressure and public mention of East Jerusalem.

Arab economic boycott of Israel and the revocation of UN “Zionism is racism.” In return, the Israeli army would withdraw from certain towns in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Although King Fahd hesitated to commit to any specific actions, the Gulf War success boosted the King’s confidence to exercise his influence on the peace process.

Later that day in Cairo, Baker’s reputation as “honest broker” was getting to pay off. Mubarak promised to promote Baker’s peace effort to the Arab leaders. During the meeting, Mubarak even telephoned President Assad of Syria, saying that the Bush-Baker team was “the best administration the region had ever had to deal with. If progress isn’t made with this administration, it will not be made” (Baker, 1995, p. 420).

On March 12, when Baker met with Shamir in Jerusalem, Baker told him that this was the best time for Israel to move the peace process forward and to receive a better deal. However, Shamir, who believed the Europeans and the UN were pro-Israel, did not accept European, the UN, or Soviet participation in a conference (unless the Soviet Union would resume diplomatic relation with Israel) and limited the conference to a regional scale. In attempt to give momentum to the plan, Baker (1995) assured Shamir, “As long as I have something to work with, I can hold off the Europeans, the Soviets, and others for an international conference” (p. 422). Nonetheless, Baker urged Shamir to consider withdrawing from southern Lebanon, talking about the Golan with Syria, or meeting Palestinians without new elections.

In that afternoon, despite Israeli objection, Baker met with a delegation of Palestinians. With reconfirming the essential of the Palestinian rights, they both were aware that the PLO’s embracement of Saddam Hussein in the war had weakened the Palestinian position in the peace process.

When Shamir invited Baker and his wife to have dinner with Shamir’s family

that evening at his residence in Jerusalem, Baker (1995) welcomed it as “the most hopeful sign of a new reality” (p. 423). During the dinner, Shamir showed Baker President Ford’s letter in 1975, which guaranteed that the US would give “great weight to Israel’s position that any peace agreement with Syria must be predicated on Israel remaining on the Golan Heights” (as cited in Baker, 1995, p. 424). Baker, however, saw Shamir might consider a room for compromise on the issue.

Baker thought Syria’s involvement was crucial to the process.⁷ In retrospect, President Assad, a leader of the Arab rejectionist front, declared that Syria would not engage peace with Israel without a full return of the Golan, where Israel had occupied during the 1967 war and Israeli “law, jurisdiction and administration” was extended in 1981 (Lea, 2002, p. 13). On March 13, Baker arrived in Damascus. While supporting the two-track approach, Assad was not willing to commit parallel CBMs unless Israel would initiate and implement first.

On March 15, Baker flew to Moscow. The Soviets were interested in the co-sponsorship of the Middle East peace conference, as a way to demonstrate new thinking in their foreign policy. At the same time, Baker expected Moscow’s diplomatic resumption with Israel. The Soviet Foreign Minister told Baker that Gorbachev would do that, but not immediately.

After coming back from the tour, Baker realized it was far more challenging to alter the status quo, but the failure of the peace effort would damage American credibility and prestige. Baker (1995) wrote, “We want everyone to invest in the process so it’s not so easy to walk away from it... We want them to build their stake in its success and increase the cost to them of failure” (p. 444). It was time for Baker to intensify shuttle diplomacy.

⁷ Syria possessed strong influence over Lebanon. The US had reached an understanding with Syria regarding Syrian control over Lebanese affair in exchange for Syrian troops to participate in the Gulf War (Lea, 2002)

On April 9, Baker flew back to Jerusalem. Shamir had budged on Soviet co-sponsorship but still not the UN, the European, or the PLO participation. Shamir requested that the Palestinian delegation be part of a joint delegation with Jordan. When they argued over UN Resolution 242, Baker (1995) told Shamir that “both sides could *interpret* the [Resolution 242] formula however they wished” (p. 445). While the Resolution 242 was the principal outline for the peace process, Baker did not want to abide with a precondition that prevent Shamir from coming to the table. Baker’s primary goal was to gather both sides at a negotiation table with less symbolism and precondition. At that afternoon, Palestinians expressed Baker their willingness to pursue peace with Israeli through a two-track process.

On April 10, while Shamir said he would consider the European Community as an observer, Shamir raised a new request that he wanted a letter from the Palestinians denying any connection with the PLO. Baker flatly rejected the request.

On April 11, Baker met with Assad in Damascus. Assad addressed four demands for the conference: an international conference rather than a regional, assurances of the co-sponsors to guarantee all its result, continuous conference to keep track on following bilateral talks, and UN sponsorship. Assad knew what happened to Egypt after concluding the peace treaty with Israel. It was important for Assad to insist on symbol over substance, otherwise he would lose Arab’s public opinion. Being frustrated by Assad’s rigid attitude, Baker claimed that it would give Israelis an excuse not to come to the table.

After returning to Washington on April 12, Baker thought the peace process would probably die because there were irreconcilable differences between the parties, especially on April 15 when Baker heard Shamir’s opposition to the idea of an international peace conference, reconvening conferences, and a Palestinian delegate from East Jerusalem.

On April 18, Baker flew back to Israel to persuade Shamir. Assuring Shamir that Israel would be protected at an opening conference which would not take votes, make decisions, or impose solutions, Baker urged Shamir to approve the conference to be more than a merely single regional conference. Nevertheless, Shamir endlessly raised new procedural requests.

Baker withheld to visit Jordan on the earlier trips because the Bush administration was so angry at King Hussein's decision to endorse Saddam Hussein during the Gulf War. However, it became inevitable that Jordan was important piece of the process. On April 19, Baker visited Jordan. Desperately needing American economic support and mediation effort to reconcile with their former financial patron, the Saudis, the King pledged to support the peace process, including the idea of a Jordanian-Palestinian delegation.

On April 21, Baker flew to Cairo and asked Mubarak for help. Because Egypt was the only Arab nations that had established diplomatic relations with Israel at that time, Baker wanted to capitalize Mubarak's influence and diplomatic experience with Arab governments as well as Israelis. Mubarak generously agreed to advice the PLO not to block this process, Assad to reconsider his procedural requirements, and Israel to accept reconvening UN conferences.

When Baker arrived in Saudi Arabia later that day, a bad news was waiting for him. While supporting US peace effort, the Saudis decided to absence themselves from a peace conference. In order to reverse the Saudis' position, Baker had to leave the persuasion in the hands of King Fahd's pro-American nephew, Prince Bandar, who had been educated in the States and was quite influential to the King.

On April 23, Baker's meeting with Assad lasted over nine hours without a

break.⁸ Baker offered to deploy US troops as peacekeepers in a buffer zone along the Golan after full bilateral peace between Israel and Syria would be reached.⁹ It was an attractive offer for Assad, which may facilitate Israeli withdrawal from there, so that Assad dropped his previous insistence upon co-sponsors' guarantee of all outcome of a conference. There were still two remaining gaps between Israel and Syria: the role of the UN; and a single ceremonial meeting or a continuing conference. Baker (1995) was frustrated in Assad's emphasis on procedural conditions which according to Baker, "have no effect and ensure no result" (p. 457). Baker thought that only way of Israeli withdrawal or renounce settlements was through direct negotiations.

At the meeting with Baker on April 26, Shamir completely refused the idea of reconvening the conference, even if the right to veto would be given. Shamir was also unyielding about the UN observer status, albeit its participation could little influence on a conference.

When Baker was in Washington due to his mother's unexpected death, Baker developed a formula for East Jerusalem issue, the most complex issue of all: no East Jerusalem residents would join as the Palestinian side of the joint delegation, but if a Palestinian from East Jerusalem happened to have a Jordanian passport, the Palestinian can be a member of the Jordanian side of delegation.

On May 3, Syrian Foreign Minister telephoned Baker in Washington and said that Assad had accepted a UN's observer status and reconvening the conference by consensus. It was a major breakthrough that Baker could market with Shamir.

Saudi's absence from a conference gave Shamir an excuse for not coming to the table. On May 7, Baker asked King Fahd through Prince Bandar, to consider sending

⁸ Since these marathon meetings were designed to wear down Assad's interlocutors, Baker called them bladder diplomacy.

⁹ Bush administration could not offer such guarantee unless the victory in the Gulf and high domestic support rate.

a representative of the six-member Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) to attend the conference as an observer.¹⁰ On May 10, the Saudis announced that Saudi Arabia as well as the GCC would join a peace conference. Saudi participation pressed Jordan, Syria, and Israel to move forward.

On May 11, Assad had changed his minds completely, asking for UN's full participation and reconvening conferences without the approval of all the parties. In addition, Assad brought the Golan issue up again. Like many Arab leaders, who carried the misperception that Israel could not refuse the US pressure because of Israeli financial and military dependence on Washington, Assad never gave up extracting new American policy commitments. It was apparent that the process went back to square one. Baker (1995) wrote that "at that moment, I was certain I'd never visit Damascus again" and prepared to pursue the process without Syria (p. 462). When Baker flew to Cairo to meet Soviet Foreign Minister Bessmernykh, Baker asked the Soviet to persuade Assad.

On May 13, Mubarak promised Baker to remind Assad that there would be no future administration could send US troops on the Golan. That afternoon Lebanese Foreign Minister Bouez assured Baker that Lebanon would participate in the conference, but they both knew it would not happen without Assad's approval.

On May 14, at a meeting with Baker in Amman, King Hussein agreed to accept a joint delegation only if the Palestinians asked him and to tell the PLO to keep a low profile during the process. Since Jordan was so cooperative, Baker guaranteed the Bush administration would send \$ 27 million in food assistance to Jordan, no matter whether Congress would object or not. In Jerusalem, despite previous agreements, Palestinian leaders started to argue about the Jerusalem issue again. Baker, being annoyed, asked them to face the reality: delay of negotiation would mean more

¹⁰ The idea was designed by Dennis Ross, director for policy planning.

settlements. Baker (1995) later wrote, “I was the crew chief for some vintage aircraft held together with baling wire and chewing gum. Every time a new crack was patched up, another fissure developed elsewhere on the fuselage” (p. 466).

The two remaining procedural issues were the focal points of the meeting with Shamir on May 15. If Shamir accepted UN observer status and periodically reconvening the conference to share the progress of bilateral talks, Baker would push the Arabs to give up East Jerusalem on the Palestinian side of any joint delegation. The next morning, however, Israeli suggestion was merely to consider the direct talks as a reconvening the conference.

After Baker return to Washington, President Bush, Baker, and US National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft decided to issue the conference invitations to all the parties as leverage to break the deadlock. However, there was still concern, if someone declined, the process might die. Therefore, instead, President Bush sent letters to Shamir, Assad, Mubarak, King Hussein, and King Fahd on May 31, proposing the compromise formula and urging all to demonstrate new flexibility.¹¹ The Bush’s letter to Shamir addressed that the conference is “not a forum for negotiations for the adoption of decisions; it is a forum for breaking the ‘taboo’ of a direct face-to-face meeting and for promoting direct negotiations” (as cited in JPS, 1991, p. 184).¹² Bush pressed Shamir to drop his objection about the UN observer and the reconvening of the conference, calling them “limited symbols” that would not override Israeli position at the conference.

Six days later, Shamir rejected to make any concessions to Bush’s compromise formula. On the other hand, the Syrians spent their time to clarify the Bush proposal

¹¹ The role of the UN in the formula was an observer on behalf of Secretary General. And the conference would be reconvened if all parties approved.

¹² None of the letters were ever made public. Only Israel newspaper published a translated letter on June 10. The letter of the above was translated back into English from Hebrew by the AIPAC and appeared in Journal of Palestine Studies.

with Washington. As Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the Soviet Union urged Assad to accept the formula to leave Israel in a difficult situation, Syria unconditionally accepted the formula on July 14.

On July 21, King Hussein also assured Baker to attend the conference and supported the idea of ending both the Arab boycott and new settlements. Palestinians, on the other hand, still insisted on the PLO participation. Baker wrote a letter of assurance to them in order to prevent Palestinians from nullifying the entire process by their absence.¹³ When Palestinians complained unfairness of the status of East Jerusalem in the conference, Baker (1995) shouted at Palestinians that “it’s not a question of fairness or what might be right. It’s a question of reality” (p. 493).

In the meantime, Shamir was shocked and skeptical about Assad’s agreement. Although face-to-face negotiations without a mediator or preconditions were what Israel had sought for decades, Shamir hesitated to answer and said, “We need a little time” (as cited in Baker, 1995, p. 494).

From July 29 to August 1, President Bush and Baker visited the Soviet Union to attend a two-day summit with Gorbachev, and both side consented to co-sponsor a Middle East peace conference in October 1991. In Moscow, Baker received a positive response from Shamir that Israel would accept the American formula with Baker’s next return to Israel. Baker called Shamir from Moscow and told him that unless Shamir gave Baker a qualified acceptance, Baker would not go to Israel. Yet hesitating to say yes, Shamir requested several conditions, including an American effort to repeal “Zionism is racism” resolution, and guaranteed Baker that he would not be disappointed when he come. Baker insisted to hear Shamir’s explicit approval before deciding to go to Israel. The next early morning, Baker called Shamir to tell

¹³ The US assured Palestinians that “nothing Palestinians do in choosing their delegation members in this phase of the process will affect their claim to East Jerusalem or be prejudicial or precedential to the outcome of the negotiations” (as cited in JPS, 1992, p. 118).

that the President approved an American effort to repeal the resolution. Then, Shamir finally accepted the American proposal. When Baker flew to Jerusalem on August 1, Baker pledged that “we are prepared to make a serious effort to get the Zionism-racism resolution repealed, but it is something we can’t guarantee. I can only promise you that we will make a serious effort” (p. 240).

4.3 Summary

Initially, Baker hesitated to take part of the Middle East peace process. However, after a successful world leadership role in the Gulf War, Baker as the US Secretary of State could not fail the Middle East peace process. The Middle East peace was in the US national interest. While the cooperation and compromise from Israel and the Arabs were essential for the peace, Baker realized the limitation of ideology that would motivate them to commit the peace process. Indeed, US-led confident-building measure that could give economical and political benefits to both parties as well as Baker’s evenhanded approach brought them to the negotiation table. The revocation of the “Zionism” resolution – Israeli prerequisite to attend Madrid peace conference – was the unintended consequences of Baker’s Middle East peace process.