

Falling into Place? Israel, Syria, Arlen Specter, and the Greater Prospect of Middle Eastern
Peace

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ABSTRACT

The Middle East has historically been a region of the world where peace has been hard to achieve. Nations and populations, such as Israel, Syria, and Palestinians, have been at odds since the end of the Second World War. The United States showed great interest in the Middle East following the Second World War, making them an important part of the historical narrative there as well.

This thesis looks primarily at the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, specifically through the career of Arlen Specter, a former United States Senator from Pennsylvania who served from 1981 to 2011. Facilitated mainly by primary source material from Senator Specter's career, this thesis illuminates the work of an often-forgotten politician who was very active in Middle Eastern politics. Specter saw Syria as an integral part of any prospect of peace between Israel and Palestine, and this thesis analyzes his personal efforts to develop relations with Syrian and Palestinian leaders in the hopes of achieving peace between Israel and Palestine, as well as between Israel and Syria. Overall, Specter's perspectives and actions work together to reveal a unique and nuanced approach to the Middle East that saw the importance of Syria, a nation that has been ostracized from the United States since 1979, in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

The project begins with a historical narrative of Israel, Palestine, and Syria. Specter then becomes the focus, and his actions and work in and pertaining to the Middle East are examined, revealing Specter's uniqueness.

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Introduction

The Middle East has been a flashpoint of violence and tension since the end of the Second World War. What once was a battleground in the Cold War has continued to be a hot bed of tension, often predicated on religious and ethnic issues. In the past ten years, Syria has descended into a bloody civil war that has created a large refugee population, and Israel and the Palestinian people have experienced brief escalations in the tensions that have existed between them for the last seventy-five years. The United States has also been militarily involved in the Middle East in the last twenty years, occupied with wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and now with the broader and hazier “war on terror”. The reasons why require an understanding of the history of the region, and of American involvement.

In the United States, a number of factors are at play in the formulation and implementation of foreign policy. Presidents are commonly looked at by the public as the arbiters of American involvement overseas, but Congress, both the House of Representatives and the Senate, play a key role in American diplomacy as well. In fact, United States congressmen and congresswomen can, and do, have the opportunity to influence American foreign policy. An excellent example is Arlen Specter, a former Senator who served Pennsylvania for thirty years, from 1981 to 2011. Politically, Specter began his career in public service as a Democrat. He then switched to the Republican Party in 1965, where he remained until 2008, when he switched back to the Democratic Party. What is crucial in this is that Specter was uniquely independent in all facets of politics. He thought for himself, generally unswayed by either ideology or partisanship in making decisions and exercising his responsibilities as a representative of the American people.

As a senator, Arlen Specter was a member of many Congressional committees, including the Senate Committee on Appropriations, and that committee's Subcommittee on Foreign Operations. These committee assignments allowed Specter to practice diplomacy for himself, and his main focus became the Middle East, specifically with regards to Israel, Palestine, and Syria.

These three nations have long, unique histories, but their growth and development following the two world wars follows a similar path. Following the Great War, the land in the Middle East that was once governed by the Ottoman Empire became international "mandates" controlled by Great Britain and France. Once the Second World War ended, the mandate system ended and the populations in these lands began the process towards independence. The land that is disputed between Israel and Palestine was originally declared in 1947 by the United Nations to be two separate nations – Israel and Palestine – but Palestinians opposed the creation of a Jewish state and a war erupted. The result of this war was victory for Israel and the displacement of Palestinians, who lost their land to the Israelis and became more or less permanent refugees.

To the northeast of Israel is Syria, whose history follows the same track from Ottoman rule to mandate to statehood. Gaining their independence in 1946, Syria was plagued with instability and upheaval for its first twenty years of existence. This began to change in 1963, when the Ba'ath Party gained control of the country in a coup d'état, which was then further cemented in 1970, when Hafez al-Asad ascended to power during the "Corrective Revolution", as it is commonly known. Asad quickly consolidated power in himself and his regime, which is still in control of Syria today, under the tutelage of Hafez's son, Bashar.

In terms of diplomacy in the Middle East, there are many factors at play and understanding the relationships and tensions can get quite confusing. To generalize, Israel, since

its inception as a nation in 1948, has been alone in the region. Most of its neighbors oppose its existence and have territorial claims to land that Israel controlled or gained control of. Israel's bordering neighbors – Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan – are or have been hostile towards the Jewish state. Between 1947 and 1982, five separate regional conflicts, known as Arab-Israeli wars, occurred between Israel and its neighbors. This is not to say that the hostility of the Arab nations in the Middle East are the root of the region's tension, however. Nevertheless, since the end of the Second World War, the tension between Israel and its Arab neighbors has been a consistent factor in Middle Eastern diplomacy, especially in the eyes of American politicians.

When the Second World War ended, the realities of the Cold War set in across the world. The Soviet Union was primarily focused on its security, but the United States became hellbent on stopping the spread of communism. This policy manifested itself in many places, but the Middle East became a particularly important region because of the independence movements that spread following the war, its geographical location south of the Soviet Union, and its rich oil reserves. Additionally, the creation of Israel as a nation established a natural American ally since Israel was democratic and similar to the United States on other levels as well. This ideological affinity between the two nations, also given the American fear of the spread of communism, made the Middle East, and specifically Israel, of particular interest to the United States government.

This analysis could continue on in excruciating detail for a number of pages, but confusions might abound. In the hopes of narrowing the focus while also achieving a unique perspective, this project will dive into Middle Eastern diplomacy, but specifically through the mind and work of Arlen Specter. Though Specter is not well-known, even in Pennsylvania, his career provides historians with the opportunity to contextualize broad issues by placing them in the realm of personal diplomacy. Specter was obviously limited in his range of action, as United

States senators are not the major arbiters of diplomacy in America. Without overanalyzing Specter's career, this paper will argue that Arlen Specter saw Middle Eastern peace holistically, believing that Syria and the Palestinians had key roles in the overall prospect of peace. While giving light to the career of the longest-serving senator from Pennsylvania and his impacts beyond the United States, this paper will also illustrate his important if ignored role in the formulation of American foreign policy.

Chapter 1: The Middle Eastern Quagmire

Arlen Specter is the primary focus of this project. His work in the Middle East provides a unique perspective on a region that has been the site of much tension and turmoil in the last seventy-five plus years. However, understanding the intricacies of Specter's diplomatic efforts requires an understanding of the modern developments of specific nation-states and peoples as well, such as Syria, Israel, and the Palestinians. Specter immersed himself diplomatically in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and negotiated with the Assads in Syria due to these regional dynamics.

To begin, the Middle East of today's world has undergone a number of important changes as compared to the Middle East of a hundred years ago, or even the Middle East of the Cold War era. Many of the countries that have made headlines in recent memory – Iraq, Syria, Israel – did not exist as fully independent states prior to the Second World War. Nationhood in the Middle East came in the post-colonial world that followed the Second World War, though momentum started to build in support of independence from colonial powers following the First World War. There are many approaches that can be taken to understand the development of independent nations in the Middle East, but the path taken here will be a country-by-country look, followed by an analysis of the political and regional dynamics in the Middle East so that Arlen Specter's career can then be contextualized with regard to Middle Eastern realities.

Israel and Palestine

Israel became a state in 1948, at the detriment of a Palestinian state. Laying claim to the same land, Palestinian Arabs and Jewish Israelis have been at odds for over a century, since the push for a Jewish state first began. In territorial terms, the area that Israel controls, including the Occupied Territories of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, in which a majority of Palestinians live,

was created from what had previously been controlled by the Ottoman Empire until the end of the First World War. At the beginning of the war, the Ottomans controlled Anatolia (Turkey), the Levant (portions of present-day Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, Israel, and Palestine), Mesopotamia (Iraq), Egypt, and parts of the Arabian Peninsula.¹ Because of its wide area of control, the Ottoman Empire was comprised of a number of ethno-linguistic groups, the two main ones in southwest Asia being Arabs and Turks. The Ottoman Empire united differing groups with shared experiences. In the Great War, the Ottomans aligned with the Axis Powers of Germany and Austria-Hungary and ended up on the losing side, which eventually paved the way for the future developments that occurred after the war.

During the war, Great Britain and France focused much effort on the Middle East against the Ottoman Empire. One tactic that these two nations used was involving local quasi-national groups in the conflict. To ensure their loyalty, Great Britain and France made deals and arrangements with these groups, promising them the opportunity to establish an “Arab state or states” after the war.² These arrangements were quite vague, since they did not specify any details on the creation of said Arab state(s), and they also did not reflect the eventual post-war policies that the Allied Powers followed. According to historian James Gelvin, Great Britain and France partook in what he calls “state-building by decree” after the war. These two world powers created nations where there were none before. This shift in policy came, according to Gelvin, from the United States’ late involvement in the Great War and President Woodrow Wilson’s “Fourteen Points”. The most consequential points that Wilson stuck to were “open covenants of peace”, predicated on the equal weight of “the populations concerned.”³ In other words, Wilson

¹ James L. Gelvin, *The Modern Middle East: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 191.

² Gelvin, *The Modern Middle East*, 196-197.

³ Gelvin, *The Modern Middle East*, 198.

wanted native people – such as the various Arab groups that had previously been under Ottoman rule – to be equally included in future independence discussions. After the war was over, the newly formed League of Nations put these ideas into official policy, in what became known as the mandates system. Mandates were, in effect, colonies that were expected to be brought to independence in a comparatively short – but unspecified – period of time. Great Britain received a mandate in the area of present-day Israel, the Palestinian territories, Jordan, and Iraq, and France’s mandate was in the area of present-day Syria and Lebanon.⁴ The mandate system helped to lay the groundwork for future states by establishing borders and territories that would become nations a few decades later. Prior to the creation of Britain and France’s mandates, nation-states like Syria, Israel, and Palestine had not existed. Great Britain and France had made nations where there had been none before, which set the stage for future tumult.

The Mandate for Palestine, which was one of Great Britain’s mandates, set the course for a future Jewish state. The official language – written by the League of Nations in 1922 – granted “the Mandatory” (Great Britain) the responsibility of “the declaration originally made on November 2, 1917, by the Government of His Britannic Majesty, and adopted by the said Powers, in favour of the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people.”⁵ This idea was rooted in the Zionist movement that had been gaining momentum since the 1880s. Championed by Austrian journalist and political activist Theodor Herzl in his book *The Jews’ State: An Attempt at a Modern Solution to the Issue of the Jews*, Zionism encouraged Jews to settle in Palestine. Prior to this movement, Jews comprised a small amount (five percent) of the population of Palestine, which grew to thirteen percent in 1914 as a result of Zionist

⁴ Gelvin, *The Modern Middle East*, 199.

⁵ “The Mandate for Palestine,” *Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs* (accessed January 6, 2022) <https://www.mfa.gov.il/mfa/foreignpolicy/peace/guide/pages/the%20mandate%20for%20palestine.aspx>.

immigration.⁶ Zionism's growth as a movement helped shift British policy in the Palestinian Mandate, which helped to encourage Jewish settlement in Palestine. This created a problem, since Palestine was largely inhabited by Arabs. As European Jews started to emigrate to the region, tensions between the two groups started to increase because of the colonialist underpinnings of the migration. The British metropole's willful ignorance of the reality of Palestine as an Arab region led to increased strain, which erupted in an Arab revolt in 1936. The British crushed the revolt, but it became clear that Jewish emigration to Palestine under the auspices of the Palestinian Mandate was no longer tenable with the current situation.⁷ The result, in Great Britain, was what became known as the MacDonald White Paper. This policy paper acknowledged the effects of unmitigated Jewish immigration to Palestine on the economy and Arab attitudes in general and advocated for a more cooperative system in Palestine between Jews and Arabs. The White Paper also qualified the desire for a Jewish state in Palestine, explaining that the original mandate declaration did not stipulate a Jewish state created at the detriment of the Arab population there.⁸ This White Paper would be overshadowed, as would relations in Palestine, while the Second World War was fought. After this conflict though, Palestine returned to the forefront of global politics.

After the Second World War, momentum for the creation of a Jewish state had gained new traction because of the Holocaust. Nazi Germany had systemically imprisoned, enslaved, and murdered six million European Jews. Creating a Jewish state thus became paramount in international thought. It was not so easy, though, due to the tensions that had built up between

⁶ Colin Chapman, *Whose Promised Land? The Continuing Conflict Over Israel and Palestine* (Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2015), 25-26.

⁷ Chapman, *Whose Promised Land?* 28.

⁸ "British White Paper of 1939 on Palestine (MacDonald White Paper), *Economic Cooperation Foundation* (accessed February 12, 2022) <https://ecf.org.il/issues/issue/955>.

Jews and Palestinian Arabs. A Jewish state with an equal or majority Arab population had proven unsuccessful, so an idea began to emerge that would become known as the “two-state solution.” As the name implies, force was put behind creating a Jewish state and an Arab state in the land that used to be the Palestinian Mandate. The UN Partition Plan, passed in 1947 by a vote of thirty-three to thirteen in favor, split the Palestinian Mandate into a Jewish state and an Arab state.⁹ This decree came from the top down, without consideration of the realities and opinions of those who inhabited the land, also failing to address the inherent tensions in the area.

The UN Partition Plan can be considered a major win for Zionism. Western powers effectively altered the future of a region without consideration and input from the native inhabitants. When Israel was declared a nation, Arabs in Palestine fought this.

European Jews and Palestinians have been at odds since before Israel’s creation as a nation. When Britain, and then the United States, were heavily involved in the administration and day-to-day governance of the Middle East before the Second World War, the native inhabitants had two choices: adopt to the practices of the western imperialists or reject change. These two choices illustrate a key difference between Israel and Palestine. Now, it is important to note that Israel generally had more western support from the beginning because of the Zionist movement. But beyond this, Palestinians stuck to their refusal to acknowledge any Zionist claims. They deemed illegitimate any Jewish state and thought the only way to stick to this stance was outright rejection of Jewish claims. What they failed to realize, however, was that with the involvement of Western powers, the international situation was changing.¹⁰

⁹ Chapman, *Whose Promised Land?* 29.

¹⁰ Stephen P. Cohen, *Beyond America’s Grasp: A Century of Failed Diplomacy in the Middle East* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009), 179.

European Jews tended to resort to similar modes of operation, rejecting the nationhood of the Palestinian people. Instead of focusing on the changing tides in the Middle East in the wake of the Ottoman Empire, Jews and Arabs firmly placed themselves, and their potential development, on rejecting the legitimacy of the other group. From the beginning of their road to independence, Jews and Arabs in the Middle East based their group identities on who they were not. Theoretically, these developments are not surprising. As historian Benedict Anderson argued, nations arise, in part, by defining the ‘other’.¹¹ Jews and Arabs took this further though by predicating much of their actions on denying the other instead of defining it and leaving it there. All in all, the UN Partition and the viewpoints of the Jews and Arabs in the Middle East set the region off on a tense path.

Situating themselves at odds with each other before the Second World War, Arabs and Jews seemed primed for conflict, as the 1947 Arab-Israeli War shows. Though this conflict did come immediately upon Israel’s creation as an independent Jewish nation, it did not resolve the underlying tensions between the two groups. In fact, an Arab-Israeli war broke out between Israel and its neighboring states in each of the next four decades following the 1947 war, ending in 1982 with the Lebanon War. Each war has its specific importance to Arab-Israeli peace and greater Middle Eastern and international affairs, but the conflict of most consequence regarding Israel’s growth as an independent nation is the 1967 War, known in Israel as the Six Day War.

The Six Day War is unique in the fact that Israel emerged victorious without instigating the conflict. Leading the Arab coalition was Syria, and they collectively attacked Israel, thinking and hoping they could win the war. In six days, Israel destroyed their Arab enemies’ militaries, tripling the size of their territory in the process. Israel came to control a few pieces of important

¹¹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2016), 40-45.

land: the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, and the Golan Heights, as well as the Sinai Peninsula and East Jerusalem.¹² As historian Stephen P. Cohen illustrates, territorial claims around Israel take on more importance than other territorial gains and losses in war, because Israel is the home of three Abrahamic religions.¹³ In a sense, Israel's assumed control of much of the important Middle Eastern territories put them in a place of power in the region. Achieving this control in just six days was remarkable and helped to cement Israel as a power in the region.

The 1967 war was important for Israel in domestic terms as well. In 1947, when Israel was declared a nation, many Palestinians were expelled from Israel by the Israeli Army into the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, where the population reached 950,000 Palestinians by 1967.¹⁴ In the twenty years between Israel's creation and the Six Day War, Israel possessed measured influence and control over Palestinians. They did not directly control the West Bank and Gaza Strip, but since Israel was an official nation and Palestine was not, Israel maintained control. This was drastically increased after the Six Day War in 1967, after which the Gaza Strip and West Bank have been referred to as the "Occupied Territories". Israel captured the land militarily and then systematically instituted policies to reduce Palestinian influence there. They allowed Jewish settlers to move into the territories, generally with freedom to operate as they saw fit.¹⁵ This influx of Jewish settlers with little liability for their actions inevitably increased the tensions between Israelis and Palestinians.

Though most Palestinians have been a displaced people since 1947, they have not been without a voice. Over the years, Palestinians have formed a number of organizations, many

¹² Joel S. Migdal, *Shifting Sands: The United States in the Middle East* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 82-84.

¹³ Cohen, *Beyond America's Grasp*, 174.

¹⁴ Joel Perlmann, "The 1967 Census of the West Bank and Gaza Strip: A Digitized Version," *Levy Economics Institute* (accessed January 30, 2022) <https://www.levyinstitute.org/palestinian-census/>.

¹⁵ Ilan Pappé, *The Biggest Prison on Earth: A History of the Occupied Territories* (Edinburgh: Oneworld Publications, 2017), 155-156.

political in nature but some have been for the purposes of violent resistance. One organization has emerged as the representative group for most of these Palestinian groups: the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). In 1974, the Arab League recognized the PLO as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, leading to the same recognition by the United Nations.¹⁶ Shortly after its founding in 1964, a man named Yasser Arafat became the Chairman of the PLO, in 1969. The PLO grew from another group, Fatah, which Arafat also controlled. Author Jonathan Schanzer views the Palestinian Authority as the representative voice for Palestinians, illustrating the difficulties of analyzing Palestinian bureaucracy. Formed in 1994 as a “civilian caretaker government,” Schanzer explains that the PA sprung from the PLO, which grew from Fatah, a terrorist group that was founded in Kuwait in the 1950s.¹⁷ All of this goes to show the complexity of Palestinian representation; for the sake of clarity, the PLO – and Yasser Arafat, who was Chairman of the PLO from 1969 until 2004 – will be considered the voice of Palestinians.

To summarize the history of Israel, and by proxy, Palestine, the status quo was established in 1947 and drastically altered in 1967. That is, Israel exists as a Jewish state with a strong position in the Middle East, thus displacing Palestinians who to this day do not have all of the formal structures of an official nation-state. Moreover, Israel’s creation as a nation immediately created conflict between Jews and Arabs in the region that still exists today. Understanding Israel and Palestine’s shared, and contradictory, development, gives more context to the development of other nations in the region and their role in politics, such as Syria.

Syria

¹⁶ “Palestinian Liberation Organization,” *The State of Palestine to the United Nations* (accessed January 30, 2022), <http://palestineun.org/about-palestine/palestine-liberation-organization/>.

¹⁷ Robert Schanzer, *State of Failure: Yasser Arafat, Mahmoud Abbas, and the Unmaking of the Palestinian State* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 6-7.

Syria's development came in much the same way that the growth of Israel and Palestine are directly tied to the Ottoman Empire and the two World Wars. Present-day Syria was a part of the Ottoman Empire, but instead of being a part of the British Palestinian Mandate following the war, the land that is now Syria was a part of France's mandate. Though Syria as it is known today did not crystallize as a nation until 1947, some of the key factors in Syria's eventual statehood began to take shape under Ottoman rule and after. As such, Syria's birth as a nation is much more gradual than that of Israel and Palestine.

To understand modern Syria, one must grasp the dynamics of the various ethnic groups that call Syria home. There are a number of ethnic groups that could be mentioned, but the most important for this project is the 'Alawi sect, with which Hafez and Bashar al-Asad identify. Commonly, the 'Alawis are considered Islamic heretics that do not comply with either Sunni or Shi'a Islam. According to historian Stefan Winter, who specifies in Ottoman Syria, this is not wholly accurate. The 'Alawis make up one of Syria's oldest communities, and Winter remarks that "in the literature, they (the 'Alawis) are generally branded as an 'extremist' branch or 'offshoot' of more normal Shi'ism; members of a 'heterodox' and covert 'sect' who practice a 'syncretic' religion with admixtures of Christianity, Zoroastrianism, and other belief systems".¹⁸ In reality, according to Winter, the Alawi faith is not the deviant faith that it is commonly construed to be. Rather, it is the norm in rural Syrian religiosity because of the beliefs and histories of the various ethnic groups.

Because of their fringe status in Middle Eastern culture and religious orthodoxy, 'Alawis are often negatively affected because of their beliefs. Under the Ottoman Empire, 'Alawis were forced to meet certain conditions before being considered as equal members of society.

¹⁸ Stefan Winter, *A History of the 'Alawis: From Medieval Aleppo to the Turkish Republic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 10-12.

Moreover, when the French took over the area where modern-day Syria is located under the Mandate System, they created a wholly distinct state for the ‘Alawis, called the “Territoire des Alaouites” and then later the “État des Alaouites”.¹⁹ Clearly, the ‘Alawi sect was a marginalized group – comprising about fifteen percent of the population of Syria in 1980.²⁰

Apart from the ‘Alawi sect, the Ba’ath Party is the other important factor in Syria’s short history, and it was formed prior to the Second World War. Born out of the ideas of Michel ‘Aflaq, Salah al-Din Bitar, and Zaki al-Arsouzi, all of whom were Arab intellectuals, the Ba’ath Party was officially formed in April 1947, when the Ba’ath *Constitution* was written.²¹ Prior to this, however, came the concept of “Greater Syria”. Formulated by Antun Sa’adeh, Lebanese politician and the founder of the Ba’ath Party in Syria, in his 1936 book *Nashu al-Umum* (The Birth of Nations), Sa’adeh postulated the concept of a ‘historical’ Syria that had previously controlled the Canaanites and Akkadians and now spread from Cyprus to the Iranian border.²² He asserted that Syria had historic claim to a large stretch of land across the Middle East, based on the ancient Assyrian Empire. Despite the various ethnic groups that call the region home, Sa’adeh and his followers began to propagate the idea that Syria was destined to spread across the region.

Officially, Syria became a nation in 1946. However, Syria’s first fifteen years as a nation were marked by a lack of stability and growth. Syria’s early history saw a number of military coups d’etat, making it nearly impossible for any sort of normalcy to be established. The possibility of Syrian stability seemed more likely in 1958, when Syria and Egypt united to form

¹⁹ Winter, *A History of the ‘Alawis*, 218-219.

²⁰ Fabrice Blanche, “The Alawi Community and the Syria Crisis,” *Middle East Institute* (accessed February 3, 2022) <https://www.mei.edu/publications/alawi-community-and-syria-crisis>.

²¹ David Roberts, *The Ba’th and the Creation of Modern Syria* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, Inc, 1987), 19, 62.

²² Roberts, *The Ba’th and the Creation of Modern Syria*, 11-13.

the United Arab Republic (UAR).²³ On the surface, this move can be seen as the unification of two Arab nations that were pan-Arab, wanting to unite all Arab nations, in nationality. Then-President of Egypt Gamal Abdel Nasser and the Syrian regime at the time, led in part by the Ba'ath Party, both were strong proponents of the unification of Arab countries across the region, a movement known as pan-Arabism. The reality of the UAR, however, was that Syria united with Egypt under the assumption that Egypt would have power over Syria as well. Within weeks, Syrian political parties were dissolved in favor of a single-party system (based on Nasser's regime), limiting the nationalism and autonomy of Syria by subordinating it to that of Egypt.²⁴ Attitudes toward the merger were mixed, with some Ba'athists believing that the union limited the national aspirations of Syria. Michel Aflaq, one of the Ba'ath Party's founding members, explained that nationalism was the correct foundation of internationalism and that the union with Egypt was important and necessary.²⁵ In other words, the Ba'ath leaders in Syria saw the union with Egypt as a steppingstone to greater growth and development. The formation of the UAR was impulsive, though, and failed to be founded on principles that might lead to a continued pan-Arab presence in the Middle East. As a result, Egypt and Syria alienated themselves from their Arab neighbors, since the UAR only comprised two Arab nations. Eventually, Egypt's domination over Syria led to Syrian unrest and the collapse of the UAR in 1961 when Syrian Army officers instigated a coup.²⁶ Though a brief period in Syrian and Middle Eastern history, the United Arab Republic exemplifies the greater aspirations of Syria, before they had better capabilities to actuate these goals.

²³ "Syria Profile: Timeline," *British Broadcasting Company*, 14 January 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14703995>.

²⁴ T. R. L. "The Meaning of the United Arab Republic." *The World Today* 14, no. 3 (1958): 93–94. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40393828>.

²⁵ T. R. L. "The Meaning of the United Arab Republic," 95.

²⁶ "Syria Profile," *BBC*, accessed January 11, 2022.

After the Syrian coup in 1961, two more coups followed in 1963 and 1965, both by Ba'ath leaders. The first allowed the Ba'ath Party to come to power, and the second removed civilian Ba'ath members from political leadership and handed it to the military, specifically the army.²⁷ In addition to removing the civilian Ba'ath leadership, the 1965 coup radicalized the Ba'ath Party in Syria. Called a "revolution from above", this coup is crucial to Hafez al-Asad's eventual rise to power. Essentially, the new Ba'ath leaders had little faith in a revolution from below, so they instituted socialist reform and redistributive efforts, from the top down. Their hope was that the newly organized and expanded Ba'ath Party structure could lead the country to modernization.²⁸ In the foreign policy sphere, the new Ba'ath leaders were more radical, arming rebels in the "Free Palestine" movement and reforging a political tie with Egypt.²⁹ Most important in this policy shift, however, was Syria's fateful decision to attack Israel, their primary enemy, in 1967. Such a decision would be consequential no matter what, but it would eventually help Hafez al-Asad come to power.

Hafez al-Asad is somewhat of an enigma to historians. Very few politicians and diplomats developed close ties to him, and his time as Syria's president is full of mixed results. He did bring Syria much needed governmental and bureaucratic stability, but at the cost of some individual freedoms. Asad himself was an 'Alawi, meaning he was towards the bottom of the Syrian social hierarchy.³⁰ Beyond being marginalized under the Ottomans and then the French, 'Alawis had their land taken, their children indentured, and they made, on average, just half of the daily cost of living in Syria at the time. The only way out of their plight was military service,

²⁷ "Syria Profile".

¹⁹²⁸ Hinnebusch, *Syria*, 53-55.

²⁹ Hinnebusch, *Syria*, 57.

³⁰ Sam Dagher, *Assad or We Burn the Country: How One Family's Lust for Power Destroyed Syria* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2019), 21-22.

so the armed services in Syria grew to include a large portion of 'Alawi men, of whom Asad was one. In the military, Asad was able to make his own way, eventually becoming an air force commander and Defense Minister after the 1966 Ba'ath Party radicalization.³¹ As a result, Asad came to exemplify the synthesis between the radical political ideology of the Ba'ath Party that had developed in the 1960s and marginalized social roots, making him a uniquely situated and therefore compelling leader and individual.

Asad came to embody one side of a divide that occurred in the Syria Ba'ath Party. After it became clear that the 1967 war would be unsuccessful in defeating Israel, two schools of thought emerged in Syria. One side pressed to not settle with Israel over the conflict, encouraging Palestinian guerillas to continue the fight while instituting deeper reforms in country. The opposition, led by Asad, argued that the war and coinciding revolution should be abandoned for the sake of national unity, and that efforts should be focused on recovering lost territories, specifically the Golan Heights, of which Israel had gained control.³² Asad's camp won out in the discussion, and this moment proved crucial to Asad, who consolidated his position as a leader in Syria.

After the 1967 war, Syria attempted to recover domestically and regionally, which led them to involve themselves in other regional conflicts. One specific event helped to complete Asad's rise to supremacy in Syria: Black September in Jordan. Black September is another name for the civil war that erupted in Jordan in 1970, with which Syria shares a border. Because of their close adjacency and due to Syria's recent regional military failure, Syrian leaders were eager to find success in some form in the region. During the Jordanian conflict, the radical Ba'ath leaders in Syria threw their support behind the Jordanian and PLO guerillas that were

³¹ Dagher, *Assad or We Burn the Country*, 31.

³² Hinnebusch, *Syria*, 57-58.

fighting the King Hussein's troops, ordering Asad to send Syrian air support to the conflict. Asad refused, and he and his aide Mustafa Tlas were dismissed from their positions. Believing himself to be correct in his beliefs, Asad's "Corrective Revolution" harnessed his considerable power to oust the radical Ba'ath leaders, completing his rise to power.³³ Asad's coup – Syria's tenth in seventeen years – was Syria's last coup, and signified the end of the "fight for Syria", meaning Syria had finally achieved the stability it needed to look forward.³⁴

In coming to power, Asad unified multiple sectors of Syrian life. Because of his 'Alawi background and his Ba'ath Party allegiances, Asad invariably vaulted these two groups to prominence when he became Syria's president. These two factors enabled his rise to power, but there was more to his staying in power. According to Eyal Zisser, a contemporary historian at Tel Aviv University, Hafez al-Asad's regime encompassed three power "orbits" – the 'Alawi orbit, the Syrian orbit, and the Arab orbit.³⁵ These orbits get progressively larger in scope, and they reflect the foci of the Asad regime. First off, as a Ba'athist, Asad placed primary value on a secular regime. Because of this fact, and his 'Alawi background, the 'Alawi community came to be the most valued group in Syria, placing the onus of power and control in Syria on the military and security forces. From this 'Alawi orbit came everything else in Syria. Asad strengthened the status of the 'Alawis, who had previously not held much power. As a result, Asad and his regime established a coalition with other groups in Syria, such as Druzes and Christians. These groups preferred Asad's regime to outright Sunni rule because the rise of the 'Alawis ensured relative security to these other group.³⁶ As a minority group themselves, 'Alawis created a coalition of minorities out of fear they would lose their control. Lastly, once these two orbits were

³³ Hinnebusch, *Syria*, 59-61.

³⁴ Eyal Zisser, *Asad's Legacy: Syria in Transition* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 1.

³⁵ Zisser, *Asad's Legacy*, 17.

³⁶ Zisser. *Asad's Legacy*, 20-21.

established, Asad and his regime were able to focus on his loftiest goal: pan-Arabism. As Zisser explains, Asad did care about Syria and his ‘Alawi and Ba’athist ties, but his main ideological goal was the spread of Arab power across the region.³⁷ All in all, the ascendancy of Hafez al-Asad in Syria signified the unification of Ba’athist ideology and the ‘Alawi sect, setting the stage for Syria’s playing of a larger role in the region.

As a ruler, Asad brought measured success to Syria. In fact, the first six years of his rule are called “the good years”, because Syria experienced economic growth and political stability.³⁸ Due to the newness of his regime, Asad was conciliatory towards other ethnic groups – such as the Sunni population, attending Sunni religious services, all while establishing an umbrella organization that united all of Syria’s political parties and created the stability that the country needed. Regionally, Asad recognized the error of Syria’s involvement in the war in 1967 and opted to do what he could to reduce tension in the region. He was still sore over Syria’s loss of the Golan Heights to Israel in the 1967 War, so he did not attempt to diffuse that situation, but he did use his power to re-establish an Arab coalition in the region.³⁹

Though Syria experienced a few good years, the nature of the Asad regime would lend itself to internal conflict. Because Hafez al-Asad came from an ‘Alawi background, he was always fearful that there would be attempts to overthrow his regime. By giving ‘Alawis and Ba’athists primacy in Syrian affairs, groups such as Sunni Muslims and the Muslim Brotherhood, a Sunni Islamist cultural and political organization, grew restless because they lost some status as a result of Asads favoring of ‘Alawis. Beginning in the late 1970s, the Muslim Brotherhood, a political entity, began to clamor for more political activism, usually against the

³⁷ Zisser, *Asad’s Legacy*, 22-23.

³⁸ Zisser, *Asad’s Legacy*, 8.

³⁹ Zisser, *Asad’s Legacy*, 9.

Asad regime. Asad chose to fight any resistance to his rule with force, and so these activists were arrested, tortured, and even killed for their beliefs. A militant branch of the Brotherhood developed that fought the Asad regime with violence, and as arrests continued, even peaceful resisters realized that violent activism against the Asad regime was their only choice.

In 1981, Damascus experienced a series of explosions that were blamed on the Muslim Brotherhood, setting the stage for a face off. The last stronghold in Syria for the Muslim Brotherhood was the city of Hama, where Asad sent troops to quell the Brotherhood's uprising. It took troops ten days to subdue the fighting, but what occurred after is more important. In twenty days, Asad's troops undertook "cleansing operations" in Hama, engaging in killing rampages and mass executions. To this day, the casualty total from the Hama massacre is a source of controversy; the low estimate is between seven and ten thousand deaths, but regime opponents argue that it is triple that amount.⁴⁰ Just twelve years into being Syria's leader, Asad showed the world that the true nature of his regime was to brutally suppress any whisper of discontent in his country. As Dagher concludes one of his chapters, "the Asad family ruled Syria uncontested for almost three decades after that".⁴¹ Exposing the regime's capacity for brutal violence and repression helped to cement Asad and Syria as a constant in the region for years to come.

After the Hama massacre, the Asad regime ruled Syria with an iron fist, suppressing any of the regime's critics. Syria's next issue, however, would be internal: who would succeed Hafez as leader? As a study of the Middle East today will show, Syria is led by Bashar al-Asad, but this was not always the plan. Bashar is the second-oldest son in the Asad clan; he had a brother named Basil who was older. Beginning in the early 1990s, after Hafez had had a health scare, the

⁴⁰ Dagher, *Assad or We Burn the Country*, 54-56.

⁴¹ Dagher, *Assad or We Burn the Country*, 56.

process of grooming Basil to become Syria's next leader began. Basil had established himself as a member of Syria's upper echelon, brokering deals with Syria's top smugglers and wealthiest individuals. A shift occurred around 1989, when Basil began taking interest in international politics and internal reform, showing that he had been tapped to be his father's successor.⁴² Much of the reform talk was for show, but it was used to garner internal support for Basil as the next leader. This all fell through, however, when Basil died in a car accident in 1994.⁴³

With the death of the eldest son, succession fell on the next-oldest son, Bashar. The difficult thing here, however, was that Bashar was studying in London to become an ophthalmologist. In fact, he was intrigued by life in London and was looking forward to starting a life there for himself, after completing his residency.⁴⁴ Nonetheless, Bashar was loyal to his father, and returned to Syria after his brother died, where he was immediately put on the track to gain the military experience and domestic support that would lead to his rise to power.

Though Bashar was an Asad, many Syrians questioned this move. Bashar had been out of the country for a few years, and he had little experience in military or governmental affairs. On a more basic level, Syria was not a monarchy, so the direct succession from father to son went against the supposed system of government upon which Syria was based.⁴⁵ Despite these concerns, Bashar was able to quickly gain a cache of support within Syria by gaining experience in the Syrian military, as well as in the Middle East by becoming his father's envoy on diplomatic trips. The regime's opponents opposed him, but generally, Bashar al-Asad, after suspending his ophthalmology career in order to help his family, was able to establish himself as the natural successor to his father with little controversy.

⁴² Dagher, *Assad or We Burn the Country*, 70-71.

⁴³ Dagher, *Assad or We Burn the Country*, 75-77.

⁴⁴ Dagher, *Assad or We Burn the Country*, 76-79.

⁴⁵ Zisser, *Asad's Legacy*, 154.

The United States in the Middle East

After the Great War, President Woodrow Wilson championed what became known as his “Fourteen Points”. These contained a number of broad ideas, the most important being the creation of an international body that would ensure the collective security of the world. Because the war was so destructive, Wilson wanted to do all he could to help avoid another conflict like it. While Wilson’s idea had merit, it was not well received back home in America. A split emerged between those who supported Wilson’s desire to lead the world into a collective body and those who wanted the United States to focus on itself and not get involved internationally.⁴⁶ Known as “isolationism”, this concept came to win out, due in part to Wilson’s death soon after the war. The League of Nations, which is the body that Wilson advocated for in the Treaty of Versailles, would not be joined by the United States, illustrating the American view of international politics in the interwar years.

Just over twenty years later, however, the Second World War erupted. By the latter stages of the war, the United States had proven itself to be *the* industrial and economic powerhouse in the world. What was different this time was that President Franklin D. Roosevelt, and all presidents after him, moved away from the isolationist, independent view of world politics.⁴⁷ The partnership that had proved the most successful during the war was the relationship that the United States and Great Britain had developed, which still existed after the war, and it was this partnership that the United States used as their model elsewhere. As historian Joel Migdal puts it, the United States, across the world, looked for that region’s “Great Britains”. The goal was to

⁴⁶ Meredith Hindley, “World War I Changed America and Transformed its Role in International Relations,” *National Endowment for the Humanities* (accessed February 1, 2022), <https://www.neh.gov/humanities/2017/summer/feature/world-war-i-changed-america-and-transformed-its-role-in-international-relations>.

⁴⁷ Joel S. Migdal, *Shifting Sands: The United States in the Middle East* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 15.

project American power and influence across the world without having to do all of the legwork themselves.

This plan has logic to it, but in practice it did not turn out to be all that successful. With Great Britain, the United States had the benefit of working with an established nation that had longevity and experience as a world power. Elsewhere in the world and the Middle East specifically, the United States was working with nations which had existed for much shorter periods of time. As such, the governmental institutions and political systems of such countries often failed to deliver on the high demands that the United States placed on them. According to Migdal, the United States found themselves working with “strongmen who headed extraordinarily ‘weak’ states,” making this policy much less productive.⁴⁸ Nonetheless, after the Second World War, the United States used its newly harnessed power to project itself across the world, and in particular the petroleum-laden Middle East.

Soon after the Second World War ended, the first Arab-Israel War ended, with Israel achieving victory. In 1950, a tripartite agreement was signed between the United States, France, and Great Britain that stipulated that foreign aid in the Middle East would only be doled out to nations that agreed to use the aid for defensive purposes. Syria did not agree to this, so they were quickly denied American aid. Around this time, the Syrian minister of national economy expressed his wish that Syria would “become a Soviet republic rather than become prey to world Jewry,” highlighting Syria’s outlook.⁴⁹ Syria believed, at the time, that it needed to turn to the Soviet Union to avoid being overtaken by Jewish settlement and its support from the United States government.

⁴⁸ Migdal, *Shifting Sands*, 16.

⁴⁹ Cohen, *Beyond America’s Grasp*, 111-112.

The Cold War was more than just a cold conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union; it affected relations and politics across the world. One example of this is in the Middle East, specifically with Syria, which was seen as the Middle Eastern nation most under Soviet influence.⁵⁰ Rather than viewing Syria through the lens of its previous colonial history under French rule, the United States used only a Cold War lens to deal with the various Syrian regimes. Beginning with President Eisenhower and his Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, Syria was linked to the Soviet Union immediately following the Suez Crisis in 1956. Because the crisis was centered around Egypt – led by Nasser and his pan-Arab, socialist ideals – Syria was at least tangentially involved in this conflict. This broke out before the United Arab Republic was formed between Egypt and Syria, but the groundwork for this partnership was already laid. Syria was, in part, led by Ba’athists at this time, and the concept of Greater Syria was fairly prevalent in Syria as well. Syria was engaged in arms deals with the Soviets while also urging Egypt to avoid getting involved in any Western peace plans.⁵¹ Overall, the United States, beginning early in the Cold War, had a limited relationship with Syria.

With Israel, the story is quite similar in that the fear of communism influenced much of American action across the globe. The Eisenhower administration was key in developing the ‘domino theory’, focused on the spread of communism – Eisenhower and the Dulles brothers believed that the loss of one nation-state to communism in a region would lead to the inevitable collapse of its neighbors to communism as well. Due to the recent independence movements in the Middle East, this was an area of concern regarding the influence of communism. As a nation, Israel was more likely to receive support from the United States since Israel was a democratic

⁵⁰ Cohen, *Beyond America's Grasp*, 107-108.

⁵¹ Cohen, *Beyond America's Grasp*, 108.

country. As historian Robert O. Freedman explains, the United States and Israel are linked not just diplomatically and economically, but also religiously, legally, militarily, and morally.⁵²

Despite this, a close relationship was not immediate upon Israel's formation as a nation. The first key moment in the US-Israel relationship was the 1967 Six Day War. In the run up to this conflict, the United States, under the administration of Lyndon B. Johnson, continued to develop stronger relations with Israel, at the detriment of their relations with Arab states. When Israel captured a large portion of Arab territory in 1967, the United States gained a lot of insight and leverage in the Middle East. At a base level, Israel's success in the war confirmed that supporting Israel was a good move. In a more complex analysis, the United States gained leverage in that Arab states now came to the State Department to broker deals to get their territory back, since the United States was close with Israel.⁵³ The 1967 war, in essence, helped further American influence without much direct involvement on the part of the US government, establishing a successful partnership.

As time has gone on, the US-Israel relationship has grown into one of America's most significant foreign policy relationships. Israel has been considered a preferred ally of the United States since the Reagan Administration called them a "major non-NATO ally" in 1986 and Congress affirmed this designation in 1996.⁵⁴ Aid to Israel is primarily military, enabling the Israeli military to become one of the most technologically advanced in the world. One main area of focus is Israel's Qualitative Military Edge (QME). The premise of American aid to Israel is not to make the Israeli army bigger than that of its neighbors; the goal is to make it superior in

⁵² Robert O. Freedman, *Israel and the United States: Six Decades of US-Israeli Relations* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2012), 1.

⁵³ Freedman, *Israel and the United States*, 26-29.

⁵⁴ Jim Zanotti, "Israel: Background and US Relations", *Congressional Research Service* (accessed January 29, 2022) <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL33476.pdf>, 16.

armaments.⁵⁵ A key program that furthers this goal is the a defense program known as Arrow, which began in 1986, but Israel was also a part of President Reagan’s Strategic Defense Initiative, in addition to other programs.⁵⁶ Militarily, the United States has provided substantial aid to Israel, beginning after the 1967 war.

The last important factor to mention is the domestic attitudes in America towards Israel. Not only have the two countries been linked diplomatically, but there has also been a strong pro-Israel lobby that has developed in the United States. More will be said about this political lobby, specifically with its relation to Senator Arlen Specter, but a quick mention here is worthwhile.

In the period of world history since the end of the First World War, much change has occurred. Empires, such as the Ottoman, British, and French have broken apart, leaving fledgling nations to fight for themselves after the mandate system ended. Beginning after the Second World War, new nations began springing up across the globe, notably in the Middle East. National entities such as Syria, Israel, and Palestine – which still to this day does not have its own sovereign territorial state – all were established in the post-war world. A part of this development is the ascension of Arab-Israeli tension, which still exists. Through all of this, the United States, since the Second World War, has been active in the region with the goal of spreading its power and influence. Often following a Cold War mindset, the United States has tended to support Israel, with minimal aid to Arab nations. What existed when Specter came into office was a domestic attitude strongly in support of Israel, coupled with tense relations in the Middle East after a few decades of Arab-Israeli conflict, setting the stage for diplomacy that would prove consequential.

⁵⁵ Arlen Specter Senatorial Papers, Group 2: Legislative Files, 1965-2011, TJU.2010.01.02, Thomas Jefferson University (managed by the University of Pittsburgh Library System)
From: <https://digital.library.pitt.edu/islandora/object/pitt%3AUS-PPiU-TJU20100101/viewer>.

⁵⁶ Zanoliti, “Israel,” 16.

Chapter 2: Specter in the Mainstream

Arlen Specter is an incredibly unique senator whose career helps to analyze and understand Middle Eastern politics. As a centrist politician, he was not ideologically wedded to a specific party platform or course of action, giving him the freedom to form his own opinions. That being said, there was some semblance of United States public opinion on how to navigate Middle Eastern diplomacy, and as a popularly elected politician, Specter was beholden to American political currents despite his ideological independence. Beyond this, Specter is not the most well-known politician, though he was involved in a number of higher-profile historical events in his thirty-year Senate career. The result, when Specter's career is utilized as a tool to understand the past, is a first-hand look at the inner workings of an independent politician who found interest in a region and strove to do all he could to help solve the problems there.

Specter – Becoming Independent

Arlen Specter was born on February 12, 1930, in Wichita, Kansas to parents who had emigrated from Russia and Ukraine. Specter lived in Kansas until college, when he spent a year at the University of Oklahoma before transferring to the University of Pennsylvania to be closer to his parents, who had recently moved to Philadelphia.¹ After graduation, Specter spent two years in the Air Force, followed by three years at Yale University, where he obtained a law degree. Specter then got a job at a private firm upon graduation but knew that he wanted to work in the public sector, where he quickly got a job in the District Attorney's office in Philadelphia. At the time, Specter was a registered Democrat, which put hurdles in the way of his career aspirations. He notes in his memoir that Democratic Party politics in Philadelphia relied heavily

¹ Arlen Specter, *Life Among the Cannibals: A Political Career, A Tea Party Uprising, and the End of Governing As We Know It* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2012), 22-23.

on patronage at the time, making it hard to advance without the political favor of a higher-up in the machine.² Still, from this position, Specter would begin to make a name for himself.

The first case Specter had an important role in was the 1963 prosecution of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, which was led on a national level by the labor leader Jimmy Hoffa. The case that occurred in Philadelphia was a part of the national case organized by Robert F. Kennedy and what was known as the McClellan Committee (the Senate Select Committee on Improper Activities in Labor and Management), giving the case national significance. Specter was able to deliver guilty convictions for all of the labor leaders tried in his case, garnering national attention for himself. After the trial, Robert Kennedy attempted on multiple occasions to get Specter to join the Justice Department, which Specter declined until he was offered a position as an assistant counsel on the Warren Commission, which was charged with investigating the death of President John F. Kennedy. On this committee, Specter helped author the “Single Bullet Theory,” which, in conjunction with his overall work on the commission, only increased his political profile.³

Back in Philadelphia, Specter began his fight against the political patronage system. In 1965, Specter expressed his desire to run for district attorney, yet the Democratic machine refused to endorse him. When Specter proposed his candidacy to the chairman of Philadelphia’s Democratic City Committee, he was told that the city “did not want another Tom Dewey.”⁴ Thomas Dewey was a former District Attorney in New York City who prosecuted organized crime leaders, such as Lucky Luciano, and Philadelphia’s Democratic leaders did not want

² Specter, *Life Among the Cannibals*, 24-25.

³ Specter, *Life Among the Cannibals*, 26-30.

⁴ Specter, *Life Among the Cannibals*, 31.

Specter, who had a history of prosecuting organized crime, to follow Dewey's footsteps⁵. Because Specter had established himself as being anti-corruption, and generally independent politically, the Republican Party ran him as their DA candidate in the 1965 election, where he eventually beat the Democratic candidate. Upon his election victory, Specter switched his party registration and became a Republican, officially.⁶

After serving two terms as district attorney, Specter lost his re-election. He attempted to obtain other public offices, but he was repeatedly thwarted by Republican party leaders. Eventually, through his own persistence, Specter ran for an open Senate spot in Pennsylvania in 1980. He was not endorsed by either party, though he did run as a Republican. He defeated the Republican-endorsed candidate in the primary and then edged out his democratic opponent in the general election, forging his ideological separation from both political parties. He did not come into the Senate on Ronald Reagan's coattails, in the "Reagan Revolution". Rather, he earned his position on his own merit: "I didn't feel I owed Reagan anything. And I certainly didn't owe the Republican Party anything."⁷ Beginning as an assistant to the district attorney in Philadelphia, Arlen Specter made a name for himself as an independent thinker who was not beholden to any political party, the two traits that would govern the rest of his political career.

As a nominally Republican senator, Specter held multiple committee assignments, helping to facilitate the day-to-day operation of American bureaucracy. Some of his committee assignments included the Senate Judiciary Committee and the Senate Committee for Veteran's Affairs, but his most important assignment in terms of its direct applicability to American policy was the Senate Appropriations Committee. This committee is tasked with writing "the legislation

⁵ "Thomas Dewey," *The Mob Museum*, (accessed April 3, 2022), https://themobmuseum.org/notable_names/thomas-dewey/.

⁶ Specter, *Life Among the Cannibals*, 31-34.

⁷ Specter, *Life Among the Cannibals*, 38.

that allocates federal funds to the numerous government agencies, departments, and organizations on an annual basis.”⁸ The Appropriations Committee also had a Subcommittee on Foreign Operations, which Specter sat on for a number of years, and which also enabled him to travel across the world and develop relationships with world leaders. The Foreign Operations Subcommittee, as well as the other subcommittee that fall under the Appropriations Committee, also draft legislation specific to their jurisdiction. The Senate Appropriations Committee website lists a large number of organizations that are considered in the jurisdiction of each specific subcommittee. Additionally, these subcommittees hear testimony from various individuals that help to better inform budget allocation.⁹ Following the trends he established in his early career, Specter did not shy away from the big areas of foreign operations; he focused much of his work as a member of the Subcommittee on Foreign Operations on the Middle East, specifically regarding the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

Though his focus was on Israel and Palestine, Specter took a unique view in this area, seeing Syria as a crucial peace to Israeli-Palestinian peace. As such, Specter developed relationships with Israeli Prime Ministers, which was not unusual given the United States’ strong support of the state. But he also developed strong relationships with a few Middle Eastern leaders who have been notorious in western media: Hafez and Bashar al-Asad, the former and current President of Syria, and Yasser Arafat, the former Chairman of the Palestinian Liberation Organization. The focus of this chapter will be with Specter’s more obvious work with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – his attitudes towards and relations with Israel, Palestine, and to a much lesser extent, Egypt. It is likely that Specter saw the Camp David Accords and wanted to

⁸ “Committee Jurisdiction,” *United States Senate Committee on Appropriations*, (accessed March 10, 2022), <https://www.appropriations.senate.gov/about/jurisdiction>.

⁹ Ibid.

bring about a similar agreement between Israel and Palestine, though Palestine is not a state so the agreement would inherently be different.

American Views

The general American policy in the Middle East when Specter came into office was predicated on support for Israel and Egypt, primarily. Coming as a result of the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, this policy illustrated the American desire at the time to be on at least decent terms with both Israel *and* the Arab powers in the region. Israel was the prime ally, but its outright victory in 1967 showed the drawbacks of a vindicated Israel. A diplomatic stalemate had set in with the Arab states after the 1967 war because of Israel's outright success. By gaining so much territory, Israel became reluctant to any sort of negotiations, seeing as they had the position of power over their neighbors.¹⁰ Though the United States had established support and a relationship with Israel before 1973, it was not a blank check, and American policy in 1973 would be highly consequential to Specter's career.

Israel's swift victory in 1967 confirmed that Israel was a strong Middle Eastern ally for the United States to be associated with. Though this was the case, the United States was also concerned at the time with not alienating the Arab nations in the region. The Nixon Administration withheld some aid from Israel leading up to and during the 1973 War, hoping for only a measured Israeli victory instead of a complete one.¹¹ More importantly, the United States saw the 1973 war as a Cold War conflict.

The Arab contingent surprised Israel with an attack on Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement and the holiest day of the year in Judaism. The 1973 war was led by Egypt. Despite the nature of the attack, the United States expected Israel to rout Egypt and Syria in the war. Yet,

¹⁰ Freedman, *Israel and the United States*, 29-30.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

Nixon's Secretary of State Henry Kissinger also thought that this conflict could be a way to break the diplomatic stalemate between Egypt and Israel that had set in after 1967, while also advancing United States interests in the region too. Going back to 1956, Egypt had been somewhat in the Soviet sphere, at least in the eyes of the United States. Then-president of Egypt Gamal Abdel Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal in 1956, which, to the United States, was an indication that Egypt had fallen to communism. Moreover, Egypt was supported by Soviet arms and aid during the Suez crisis.¹² The United States did not get involved militarily in 1956, but the Soviet-Egyptian relationship altered the politics of the region.

If a measured Egyptian victory were to occur, Nixon and his advisors thought that it would do two things: force Israel to negotiate with its Arab neighbors and allow Egypt, now led by Anwar Sadat, to regain some national pride and hopefully reestablish diplomatic ties with the United States. As the war was waged, the United States initially denied Israeli requests for aid, placing the burden of action on the Soviets, who were gearing up to airlift supplies to Egypt. When Sadat denied a UN ceasefire resolution just a week into fighting, American attitudes changed, and the introduction of US military aid to Israel turned the tide of the war in Israel's favor.

With the end of the 1973 war, the two main foci for the United States in Middle Eastern politics became Israel and Egypt, and it would remain this way for many years. The famous Camp David Accords were signed in 1978 between Israel and Egypt, often considered a "triumph" in Middle Eastern peace.¹³ In terms of foreign aid, Egypt and Israel both held priority

¹² "Suez Crisis – Definitions, Summary & Timeline," *History*, April 27, 2021, <https://www.history.com/topics/cold-war/suez-crisis>.

¹³ Seth Anziska, *Preventing Palestine: A Political History from Camp David to Oslo* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 13-15.

over other nations, with Israel receiving “no less than 1.2 billion dollars” and Egypt receiving “not less than 815 million dollars” in economic assistance alone in 1991.¹⁴

Just two years later, in 1993, however, American aid to Israel increased to three billion dollars.¹⁵ The justification for this \$1.8 billion increase in aid was Israel’s role in the Gulf War that broke out when Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990. According to Arlen Specter’s letter to his colleague Patrick Leahy, the chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee’s Subcommittee on Foreign Affairs at the time, Israel showed restraint during the conflict. Iraq bombarded Israel with missile attacks, likely in an effort to broaden the conflict and take some of the attention off of themselves, but Israel remained patient. The whole situation, according to Arlen Specter, highlighted the importance of “enhancing Israel’s defense capability so that it can defend itself as a free and democratic society against a variety of hostile forces.”¹⁶ Even in 1993, twenty years after the last major Arab-Israeli War and major threat to Israel’s security, Arlen Specter’s work in the Senate shows the continued interest in protecting Israel.

Not only has the United States been interested in protecting Israel and its security, but it has also ensured that Israel develops militarily and economically in proportion to its neighbors. In 1985, the International Security and Development Cooperation Act was discussed in the Senate. In the bill, there was a part that reflected the desires of the Reagan administration to provide humanitarian aid to Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and West Bank, and the language of the bill stipulated that the aid could only go to those of Palestinian background. One of Specter’s colleagues in the Senate, Jesse Helms, proposed an amendment that removed this Palestinian

¹⁴ Arlen Specter Senatorial Papers, Group 2: Legislative Files, 1965-2011, TJU.2010.01.02, Thomas Jefferson University (managed by the University of Pittsburgh Library System)

From: <https://digital.library.pitt.edu/islandora/object/pitt%3AUS-PPiU-TJU20100101/viewer>.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

stipulation so that anyone, including Israelis, in the West Bank and Gaza Strip could receive aid.¹⁷ Even on the humanitarian front, Israel had primacy in American politics.

Another example of this policy came during the 1990 Gulf War. Iraq invaded Kuwait, which put other Middle Eastern nations like Saudi Arabia at risk. Because of the United States' interests in the region overall, which were – and still are – largely predicated on oil, aid was offered to nations that were at risk of attack from Iraq. In addition to providing aid to at-risk nations in the region, the Bush administration helped lead a coalition of thirty-five countries, most of whom were traditional western allies, that united together to fight Iraq's wrongful invasion. The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait was generally recognized as wrong across the world, so nations such as the Soviet Union and Syria sided with the United States, switching from the established Cold War-world alliances and making them temporary allies.¹⁸ Recognizing that the United States would help any nation which was imminently threatened by Iraq, Arlen Specter wrote to President George H. W. Bush imploring him to also maintain the pre-established military balance between Israel and its neighbors. Specter explicitly stated his fear that “sales to Arab nations without counterbalancing sales to Israel could create a future risk to Israel once, hopefully, the Iraqi threat is resolved.”¹⁹ Even when Israel was not directly threatened, focus was still given to its security and the maintenance of its power in the Middle East.

Now, American aid to Israel, at least militarily, is primarily aimed at maintaining Israel's QME. Such a policy is an astute analysis of the Middle East through the Israel-first lens that has long been the way the United States has looked at the region. Israel is a smaller nation, especially compared to its neighbors. In 2001, Israel's population was 6,400,000, compared to a

¹⁷ Arlen Specter Senatorial Papers, Group 2.

¹⁸ “The First Gulf War,” *Office of the Historian, Foreign Policy Institute*
<https://history.state.gov/departments/history/short-history/firstgulf> (accessed February 20, 2022).

¹⁹ Arlen Specter Senatorial Papers, Group 2.

population of 69,800,000 in Egypt and 17,100,000 in Syria.²⁰ With regards to land size, Israel is also smaller than its Arab neighbors, totaling 22,070 square kilometers of land in 2000 compared to 1,001,450 square kilometers for Egypt and 185,180 square kilometers for Syria.²¹ Based on factors out of its control, Israel is inherently at a disadvantage when it comes to population and land size. Rather than try to do the impossible and make Israel's army bigger than its neighbors, the United States has helped ensure that the Israeli military is the most well-equipped and technologically advanced in the region. This is where the QME comes into play. What is exemplified by the above examples, however, is an extension of the QME beyond military aid, which hopes to maintain Israel's security in humanitarian as well as military development. The Helms amendment to the 1985 Foreign Security and Development Cooperation Act is key, since it ensured that all residents of the Gaza Strip and West Bank would be able to receive humanitarian aid. This shift towards full support of Israel, not just in the military sense, indicates the presence of a key influential factor in American politics, as well as the career of Arlen Specter: the pro-Jewish lobby.

Problems with Palestine

Going beyond 'normal' American policy, Senator Specter gave attention to the Palestinian point of view as well. He was a strong proponent of a firm stance towards the PLO that was predicated on their denunciation of terrorism, though he would sacrifice this official policy for the sake of his own personal actions and goals on occasion.

²⁰ Farzaneh Roudi-Fahimi, "Population Trends and Challenges in the Middle East and North Africa," *Population Reference Bureau*, December 1, 2001, <https://www.prb.org/resources/population-trends-and-challenges-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa/>.

²¹ "Surface Area (sq.km) – Middle East & North Africa," *The World Bank*, (accessed February 20, 2022), https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/AG.SRF.TOTL.K2?end=2000&locations=ZO&name_desc=false&start=1961.

Represented in most cases by the Palestinian Liberation Organization and its Chairman Yasser Arafat, Palestinians have generally been dismissed in international diplomacy throughout the last seventy-five years. They have been at the mercy of Israel since 1947, but especially since 1967. Apart from this, Palestinian actions on the world stage have not helped their case either. The PLO, as a representative institution, established governing principles to operate under. Known as the Palestinian National Covenant, this ideological foundation set Palestine at odds with the United States and its allies.

In general, the Palestinian National Covenant contains logical principles, based on what has been previously discussed about Palestine and Israel. It claims that the Partition of 1947 and the subsequent creation of Israel are both illegal because they went against the will of Palestinians and ignored their “natural right in their homeland.” On a personal level, it established the fact that the duty of individual Palestinians is to retrieve their homeland. Lastly, it legally explained that the PLO is the representative organization for the goals stated in the charter.²² Taking this further, however, the Palestinian National Covenant declares that being Palestinian means to engage in armed revolution. Article 7 states: “That there is a Palestinian community and that it has material, spiritual, and historical connection with Palestine are indisputable facts. It is a national duty to bring up individual Palestinians in an Arab revolutionary manner,” which is followed up by the statement that “armed struggle is the only way to liberate Palestine” (Article 9), and then finally the conclusion that Palestinians “reject all solutions which are substitutes for the total liberation of Palestine” (Article 19).²³ Clearly, the PLO was bound to clash with the United States and Israel. American support of Israel violated Article 7 of the PNC, and the predication of Palestinian efforts on armed resistance would

²² Arlen Specter Senatorial Papers, Group 2.

²³ Ibid.

inevitably lead to conflict, given the PLO's view on Israel and the western imperialism that established the Israeli state. As a senator involved in Middle Eastern affairs, Arlen Specter provides a close examination of these tensions.

In the thirty years after the creation of Israel, much of the effort to defeat Israel and regain the Palestinian homeland was exerted by Palestine's Arab neighbors, since Palestine did not have the apparatuses of a full nation-state and thus were unable to wage outright war. This changed after the 1982 Arab-Israeli War, known as the Lebanon War, which signified a shift in the tactics that Palestinians were using to achieve their goals. Essentially, the 1982 war broke out when PLO-backed terrorists refused to end barrages on Israeli territory, resulting in an Israeli Defense Force invasion. Though the Israeli Defense Force's invasion was successful – they captured the Lebanese capital, Beirut – it failed to destroy the PLO's foothold in Lebanon.²⁴ More importantly, it showed that the PLO was no longer content to limit their armed resistance against Israel to the instances of overall Arab hostility towards Israel. By refusing to quit with the cross-border attacks, the PLO and its branch institutions showed that not only were they more brazen, but that brazenness would not be tolerated by Israel. Thus, the PLO gained increased attention on the international stage.

The Intifada brought Palestinians increased attention internationally, but the PLO attempted to legitimize themselves by establishing offices in the United States in 1974.. This first foray into the United States created a workplace for the PLO's observer mission to the United Nations, which was followed up in 1978 with the formation of the Palestinian Information Office in Washington, D.C., which was charged with disseminating information on Palestine and the Palestinian cause. This was short lived, however, when the United States passed legislation in

²⁴ "The Lebanon War, 1982," *Anti-Defamation League*, (accessed February 22, 2022), <https://www.adl.org/resources/glossary-terms/the-lebanon-war-1982>.

1987 that labeled the PLO as a terrorist organization, prohibiting the PLO from maintaining its offices in the United States.²⁵ The designation came at around the same time that the Intifada was beginning. The Intifada was a period of largely non-violent resistance on the part of Palestinians that was met with a largely violent response on the part of Israel. The terrorist organization label seems to have been justified by the fact that the PLO opposed Israel, the United States' prime ally. Palestinian resistance in the early parts of the Intifada were not wholly non-violent, but the PLO was designated a terrorist organization by the United States at the same time that they were resisting Israeli occupation.

In looking at Specter's career, it is clear that he supported the stance that demanded the PLO condemn terrorism. In 1990, Specter engaged in substantive communication with then-Deputy Director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Richard J. Kerr. In a personal letter, Specter asked Kerr to provide any information that he could on PLO involvements in recent terroristic activities, specifically thirteen incidents that occurred within Israel's pre-1967 borders between December 15, 1988, and December 15, 1989. In response, Kerr explained that the PLO was not overtly linked to these events, but that "intel was lacking on PLO involvement." He did acknowledge an important aspect of PLO ideology during the Intifada, writing that, "Arafat and all PLO leaders distinguish acts of armed resistance from acts of terrorism, however, and consider Intifada violence and cross-border infiltrations into Israel as legitimate armed struggle."²⁶ Though Kerr's assessment of the PLO is insightful, Specter's inquiry is important too. Without mentioning the Intifada by name, Specter gave credence to the PLO's actions in an effort to hold them accountable.

²⁵ Arlen Specter Senatorial Papers, Group 2.

²⁶ Arlen Specter Senatorial Papers: Group 2. (Emphasis maintained).

A few weeks before Specter wrote to Kerr, he wrote to the Director of the CIA, William H. Webster, specifically asking for an intelligence assessment on the PLO. What prompted this letter was a statement that Arafat made on Radio Monte Carlo on January 2, 1989, in which he proclaimed that “any Palestinian leader who proposes an end to the Intifada exposes himself to the bullets of his own people and endangers his life.” Just two weeks later, Arafat made the threat more personal, asserting, “whoever thinks of stopping the Intifada before it achieves its goals, I (Arafat) will give him ten bullets in the chest.”²⁷ With such a pugnacious statement from the leader of the Palestinian representative body, progress between Israel and Palestine was bound to be slow or non-existent without face-to-face discussions.

Arafat was the logical person to meet with to discuss rapprochement in Israeli-Palestinian affairs, but he was often a vocal supporter of violent resistance. Because of this and the Subcommittee on Foreign Operations’ assessment that the “loose structure” of the PLO allowed “some disparate, fringe elements to oppose the peace process,” Specter often made explicit mention of reasons *not* to negotiate with Arafat and the PLO. Beyond his statements included above, Specter argued that Arafat consciously condoned and gave his blessing to at least a few acts of terrorism.²⁸ The issue at hand was the murder of United States Ambassador Cleo Noel and the Deputy Chief of Mission George C. Moore in Khartoum, Sudan, in March 1973. The Senate Select Committee on Intelligence reviewed State Department and intelligence community information on this event in which the Black September Group, an arm of Fatah, itself a branch of the PLO – the PLO and its underlying groups can get quite convoluted – attempted to seize the Saudi Arabian embassy in Sudan. In the process, the Black September Group killed Noel and Moore, which naturally aroused a negative reaction from the United States. According to the

²⁷ Arlen Specter Senatorial Papers: Group 2.

²⁸ Ibid.

Intelligence Committee's report, the Black September Organization's actions in Khartoum were done "with the full knowledge and personal approval of PLO Chairman and Fatah leader Yasser Arafat."²⁹

Specter rehashed this attack, which occurred before he was a senator, in 1985, when Arafat was talking of possibly coming to the United States to petition the United Nations on behalf of his people. Using Arafat's knowledge and approval of the 1973 attack, Specter wondered about the possibility of prosecuting Arafat as a co-conspirator in the attack.³⁰ Though this may seem a bit extreme, this reflects a change in Specter's policy towards an even firmer stance on Arafat and the PLO. Specter cited the "Law of Nations" in his musings on whether Arafat could be prosecuted, but nothing was possible unless Arafat set foot on American soil. Eventually, no legal action was brought against Arafat for the 1973 attack.

Though Specter's stance regarding aid to Palestine was straightforward and clear, it was not something that he followed strictly all of the time. In fact, one of the most interesting examples of Specter's opinions on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict came fairly early on his senatorial career, during the Reagan administration. In the summer of 1988, less than a year after the First Palestinian Intifada began, then-Secretary of State George Shultz met with two members of the Palestinian National Council, which is the "highest legislative body of the PLO."

In a typed piece, likely meant to be a public statement, Arlen Specter voiced his opposition to Shultz's actions. Citing a 1985 law signed by President Reagan, Specter reiterated that American policy regarding negotiations with the PLO was illegal unless the PLO recognized Israel's right to exist and if they accept UN Resolutions 242 and 338. These were resolutions passed after the 1967 and 1973 wars, respectively, further enumerating Israel's legitimacy and

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

calling for the end to Arab belligerency.³¹ Based on the language of the Palestinian National Covenant, and the fact that Palestinians rose up to resist Israel, in the Intifada, it is safe to say that these conditions had not been met. Taking it further, Specter argued that Shultz's meetings set a dangerous precedent that "contradicted the objectives of American policy, law, and commitments." Not only did Shultz's meeting go against American policy in the region, but it had the possibility of sending the wrong message to Israel. In the excerpt, Specter explains that "Israel cannot be expected to take the necessary risks for peace ... if there is uncertainty about America's commitment to stand by its pledges both past and future."³² According to Specter's points in this statement, even the shortest meeting with a Palestinian branch, however diplomatic that branch might be, went against broader American policy and goals while also undermining U.S.-Israel relations.

In his role in the Senate on the Subcommittee for Foreign Operations, Senator Specter travelled to places, such as the Middle East on multiple occasions in order to better inform his work on the committee. These trips were often taken to meet with American allies – nations such as Israel and Egypt were common visit spots – but they were also undertaken to attempt to forge new relationships.³³ In Specter's travels to the Middle East, he met and established a relationship with Arafat, with the hopes of progressing Israeli-Palestinian peace. Why, then, was Specter so against Shultz's meeting with the PLO but was willing to undertake one himself?

First off, the timing of Shultz's trip compared to Specter's trip is important. Shultz met with PLO representatives in 1988, soon after the start of the Intifada, which signified a threat to Israel's security. By meeting with the PLO so soon after the start of the Intifada, Specter likely

³¹ Arlen Specter Senatorial Papers: Group 2.

³² Ibid.

³³ Arlen Specter Senatorial Papers: Group 2.

considered it to be giving credence to the Palestinian cause and as a lack of support for Israel, by contrast. Regarding his trips to meet with Arafat and the PLO, the earliest record of such a meeting comes in the late 1990s, 1998 to be specific. At this time, five years had passed since the Oslo Accords were signed, which ended the First Intifada.³⁴ Israeli-Palestinian peace had not been totally secured, but the tension that existed in 1988 was not manifesting itself into overt conflict in 1998. As such, Specter's diplomatic endeavors in working to establish functional relations with Arafat and the PLO as the turn of the century approached is partially indicative of the state of affairs between Israel and Palestine.

Beyond this, it is very possible that Specter's meeting with Arafat reflected his desire to try to make a name for himself in American and world politics. As one of one hundred, individual senators do not usually get name recognition unless they make headlines for the wrong reasons or elevate themselves into higher governmental positions, such as a Cabinet-level secretary or, in some cases, the presidency. Even serving on notable committees in the Senate like Specter did is often not enough to garner a national reputation. Historically, however, individuals that help reestablish relations with closed off countries or people are lauded for their success. Examples of this include Commodore Matthew Perry and the opening of Japan to the West in 1853, or in more recent memory, the reestablishment of relations with China during the Cold War, led by President Richard Nixon and his Secretary of State Henry Kissinger.

In general, Specter supported a hardline stance regarding Palestine and the PLO. For aid to be given to the PLO, they had to jump through hoops and abide by all of the United States' stipulations. Generally, though, both Israel and the PLO opposed any peace negotiations because both groups refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of the other. As Benedict Anderson argued in

³⁴ Anziska, *Preventing Palestine*, 282-283.

his work on nationalism, the concept of nationalism also involves determining what the “other” is, or what is not considered of the nation. Anderson explains that nations differentiate themselves from those outside the nation by using three things: the census, the map, and the museum.³⁵ Israelis and Palestinians both established their national identity, in part, by asserting the illegitimacy of the other. Because of this, negotiations have been and will continue to be futile. Each group will not cede anything to a group that they view as illegal or illegitimate.

As far as Arlen Specter is concerned, he seemed to use his place in American foreign policy to carve out a unique role for himself. He typically supported supplying Israel with large amounts of economic and military aid, while inversely holding Palestine to a high standard in order for aid to be sent their way. While clearly an independent politician, Specter’s legislative work follows much of the prevailing tides of American diplomacy in the Middle East. In practice, however, Specter operated from a much more flexible position. By meeting with Arafat, Specter already went beyond where most American politicians got when dealing with Palestinians, and he used this opportunity to try to make a name for himself.

Conclusion

Keeping largely with broader American policy in the Middle East, Arlen Specter strengthened American ties to Israel through substantial foreign aid, while conversely making the PLO adhere to stringent criteria in order to acquire American aid. When Arlen Specter was elected to the United States Senate, Israel had strong control over Palestine-occupied territories, having occupied the West Bank and Gaza Strip. While this was the case, the situation was not stagnant. Negotiations were fairly constant, with periods of active resistance from Palestinians happening on two separate occasions during Specter’s time in office. As a member of the Senate

³⁵ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 163-170.

Appropriations Committee and this committee's Subcommittee on Foreign Operations, Specter was immersed in a number of international diplomatic efforts throughout his thirty years, and he took particular interest in Israeli-Palestinian relations.

This assessment focuses solely on his work with appropriations and ignored the personal aspect of his work, in which more nuance is revealed. While he criticized former Secretary of State George Shultz for meeting with the PLO in 1988, Specter himself met with Yasser Arafat on multiple occasions throughout his time in the Senate. This contradiction is likely rooted in the desire of Specter to make a name for himself. Bringing the Palestinians to the negotiating table through cultivating a personal rapport with Arafat would have made Specter internationally renowned. Due to arrogance, in part, and also a desire to try and achieve Israeli-Palestinian peace, Arlen Specter forged his own path in Middle Eastern diplomacy by working with a leader that had been ostracized from western diplomatic efforts. Unfortunately, Specter's solicitation of Arafat and his attempts to broker peace proved unsuccessful, due to the intransigence of the situation and his limited power as a United States senator.

Chapter 3: Befriending the Pariah – Specter, the Asad Family, and Syria

Arlen Specter showed great interest in Israeli-Palestinian relations, but that did not mean he only dealt with those two groups. Israeli-Palestinian peace is one facet of Middle Eastern diplomacy, and is a complex issue in itself, which meant that Specter worked and developed relationships with other Middle Eastern nations, the most notable being Syria. While Specter dealt with Syria on its own, he also very quickly realized Syria's influence in Israeli-Palestinian relations as well.

Just as a status quo had been established regarding Israel and Palestine prior to Specter coming into office, Syria's status in international affairs had also been cemented before Specter was elected. In 1979, Syria was placed on the United States' State Sponsors of Terrorism list.¹ This designation signified official recognition that Syria had repeatedly supported international acts of terrorism and designated them as a state sponsor of terrorism, resulting in sanctions from the United States government. These sanctions include "a ban on defense exports and sales and miscellaneous financial restrictions," among other things.² Officially, the United States has severely limited relations with Syria, and it has been this way since 1979, because of Syria's support of terrorism. But this did not limit Specter, who met with Syrian leadership at least seventeen times throughout his senatorial career.³

By visiting Syria so much, Specter was able to develop a personal relationship with the Asad family of which most western leaders had nothing similar. This relationship gave Specter a very unique claim to fame, and it is reasonable to assume that setting himself apart from his colleagues was a partial reason why he developed such a friendship. But beyond this, Specter's

¹ "State Sponsors of Terrorism," *US Department of State* <https://www.state.gov/state-sponsors-of-terrorism/> (accessed March 7, 2022).

² *Ibid.*

³ Arlen Specter Senatorial Papers: Group 2.

relations with the Asads in the context of his work with Israel and Palestine reveal a deeper understanding of Israeli-Palestinian tension because Syria played a role in enabling and supporting the PLO. All in all, Specter's relationships with former Syrian President Hafez al-Asad and his son, Bashar, however controversial they may have been, reveal a unique understanding of Middle Eastern politics that Specter possessed.

Syria: Middle Eastern Middleman

Since the "Corrective Revolution" led by Hafez al-Asad in 1970, Syria has been a stronghold for secular socialist (Ba'ath Party) ideology. A tenet of the Ba'ath Party is pan-Arabism, or the unification of the Arab nations, so Syria has been active in establishing relations with other Arab nations in the Middle East. Under Asad, much of Syria's diplomatic motivation is in favor of the idea of "Greater Syria," which would extend beyond the bounds of Syria proper. This, coupled with pan-Arabism, has inspired the Syrian state to get involved in cultural unification with its neighbors on a regional level.

Upon coming to power, the Asad regime focused on consolidating power domestically and in the Middle East. Asad wanted Syria to be the prime Arab nation in the region, helping its smaller neighbors and furthering Arab autonomy and power in the world. This led to the desire to influence Lebanon, Jordan, and Palestine.⁴ This desire for influence, specifically with regard to Palestine, brought Syria into conflict with Israel. Syria was a part of the Arab contingent that attacked Israel in most of the Arab-Israeli wars, and the loss of the Golan Heights in the 1967 war was a sticking point for Asad and his regime, making Israel Syria's main enemy.

The main goal for Asad – both Hafez and especially Bashar – was to be *the* Arab nation that western powers went to first to negotiate over any major regional issue. This is especially

⁴ Barbara Kellerman and Jeffrey Z. Rubin, *Leadership and Negotiation in the Middle East*, (New York: Praeger Publishing, 1988), 74-75.

important to understand because Asad came to power during the Cold War. Instead of aligning Syria with one particular side, the Asad regime strove to do what was best for them, which can be called a Syria-first policy. Asad attempted to become a parent state to Lebanon and Jordan and became sort of a de facto stronghold for Palestinians.⁵ Syria has usually been in opposition to the United States and its western allies as a result, but not to the extent of performing acts of terrorism themselves. The reason they have been on the terrorist list, however, has been their initial support of the PLO and their recent enabling of groups like Hamas, which is a Palestinian Sunni-Islamic fundamentalist organization that often resorts to terrorism.

Syrian relations with its other neighbors further show their pragmatism. Based on Syria's political ideology, it would be reasonable to assume that Syria would be on friendly terms with Iraq and would be a strong enemy of Iran. Iraq is also a Ba'athist nation, making them ideologically the same as Syria, while Iran is a fundamentalist Islamic theocracy, in stark opposition to Syria. The opposite of what is assumed here is the reality: Syria is friendly with Iran and has not gotten along with Iraq under the governance of the Asad regime, since Iran acknowledges Syria's role in the region, feeding into Asad's view of Syria. Likewise, Syrian Ba'athists viewed Iraqi Ba'athists as "not a true Ba'ath regime", a viewpoint that was reciprocated by Iraq under Saddam Hussein and his state allies. Moreover, the Iraqi Ba'ath Party was run by civilians, in contrast to the military-based Asad regime.⁶

Though Syria's distance from Iraq is important in understanding its regional role, it is even more important when analyzing Syria's relationship with Iran. Iran is at odds with its neighbor Iraq, and though it makes little sense, Iran has had positive relations with Syria because

⁵ Hinnebusch, *Syria*, 141.

⁶ Moshe Maoz and Avner Yaniv, *Syria Under Assad: Domestic Constraints and Regional Risks* (New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc., 1986). 127-128.

it benefits their efforts against Iraq. The Syria-Iran partnership, in the early Asad years, was more beneficial for Iran than for Syria, mainly because Syria's tensions with Iraq meant that Iran was not the Iraq's only focus in the region.⁷ For Syria, though, Iran's willingness to cultivate a positive relationship with Syria was just fine for the Asad regime, because it reinforced the idea that Syria was the power broker and middleman in the Middle East.

To further illustrate this point, Bashar al-Asad's tactics in the Middle East need also be examined to provide a continuous policy agenda for Syria throughout the time that Specter was in office. In the aftermath of the September 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States, a large portion of the world united together in the "war on terror", as former President George W. Bush called it. Initially, Bashar and Syria voiced their support for rooting out terroristic enterprises in order to stop further attacks, even sharing intelligence on Al-Qaeda operations with the United States. Though this was helpful to the United States, Bashar also helped Iraq by allowing Saddam Hussein to circumvent United Nations (UN) oil sanctions by pumping oil through an old Syrian pipeline.⁸ This oil deal was very profitable and it shows the practicality of the Asad regime. While supplying intel to the United States, Bashar was more than willing to engage with an enemy of the United States if it was profitable for him and his regime. Moreover, and Bashar used his deal with Iraq as leverage in his relations with the west, since he had a line of communication directly with some of the United States' enemies.

At around the same time, Lebanon was experiencing instability, instigated largely by Hezbollah, an Iranian-backed, militant Shi'ite Islamic group. While sharing intelligence with the United States, Bashar also supported Hezbollah and their actions against Israel.⁹ The tension

⁷ Moaz and Yaniv, *Syria Under Assad*, 111.

⁸ Dagher, *Assad or We Burn the Country*, 109-110.

⁹ Dagher, *Assad or We Burn the Country*, 115-119.

culminated in 2006, when war broke out in Lebanon. Bashar showed strong support for Hezbollah, and when a UN ceasefire was announced, Hezbollah had not been destroyed by Israel, which Bashar took to be a sign that his resistance of American aggression was working.¹⁰ Importantly, the Syrian army was not involved in Lebanon in 2006, and as journalist Sam Dagher explains, this was the status quo. According to Dagher, “Only Iran, Hezbollah, and sectarian militias modeled after Hezbollah could ultimately protect him (Bashar) and his regime.”¹¹ Essentially, Syria allowed other groups, however militant or terroristic they were, to act on their agendas, as long as it put Syria in a position of leverage. In a 2005 CNN interview, Bashar explicitly stated this view, saying, “What can they (the West) do about many issues in the Middle East that Syria is essential in solving them? Nothing. We are essential. They cannot isolate Syria.”¹² For the Asad regime, involvement in the Middle East’s problems was central to how they viewed themselves in world affairs. To today, they are worried less with resolving their issues and are focused more on being a place to turn regarding other problems in the Middle East. As long as they hold some leverage, the Asads view their policies as successful.

Syrian Mentalities

From an American perspective, Syria’s role in Middle Eastern affairs was generally of little concern. As previously mentioned, Israel and Egypt became the main foci of American diplomacy in the Middle East, which implicitly left Syria out. Syria’s designation as a state sponsor of terrorism in 1979 naturally did not help the cause of the Asad regime, but nonetheless, Syria received little attention in American political and legislative discourse around the time that Specter came into office. In fact, when Syria was mentioned, it was not with much fear or worry.

¹⁰ Dagher, *Assad or We Burn the Country*, 122-124.

¹¹ Dagher, *Assad or We Burn the Country*, 125.

¹² Dagher, *Assad or We Burn the Country*, 126-127.

Just a few years into his first term as senator, in 1983, Arlen Specter made a trip to Europe and the Middle East, visiting Israel, Egypt, and the Vatican, and meeting with Menachem Begin, Hosni Mubarak, and the Pope, the leaders of each respective country. In a letter to his long-time friend, Edward Rosen, Specter voiced “cautious optimism”, referencing a conversation he had had with Egyptian President Mubarak.¹³ Specifically, Specter believed Mubarak’s assertion that Syria would not start another conflict with Israel because it knew it would not win and that the Soviet Union would not support them.¹⁴ Whether or not this was a true assessment is not as important here. Rather, it shows an attitude towards Syria in Specter’s work that provides some understanding of his approach. Just two years in as senator, Specter was already thinking of Syria and its relations with Israel. This “Israel-colored” lens, to give this approach a name, is what makes Specter’s work with Syria particularly unique to him.

Looking at the most straightforward aspect of Specter’s senatorial career – appropriations – yields little to no mention of Syria, as is to be expected. When Specter was using phrases such as “peace-supporting allies in the Middle East,” referring to Israel and Egypt, when soliciting support for appropriations language from his fellow senators, it makes sense that Syria was not mentioned. As a state sponsor of terrorism, serious limitations were put on American aid to Syria, effectively eliminating it as a possibility. This is not to say that Syria’s terrorism designation was wrong, however.

On multiple occasions, Arlen Specter requested assessments and information from the State Department about what he called “Damascus-based terrorism”, and there were three specific attacks that Specter linked to Syria. These three events – the bombing of the US embassy in Beirut on April 18, 1983, the attack on US Marine barracks in Lebanon on October

¹³ Arlen Specter Senatorial Papers: Group 2.

¹⁴ Ibid.

23, 1983, and the bombing of Pan-Am Flight 103 on December 21, 1988 – all resulted in substantial American losses and were all executed by various Islamic terrorist groups. Islamic Jihad claimed responsibility for both attacks in Lebanon while a US court placed responsibility on Hezbollah. And though the Pan-Am Flight bombing has not officially been attributed to any specific group, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) was suspected of playing a big part in the attack.¹⁵ These attacks were brought up in questions that Specter sent to Secretary of State James Baker because there was talk at the time of removing Syria from the state sponsors of terrorism list. The two groups involved in these attacks have no direct connection to Syria, that much is clear. Syria is a secular state, making the Islamic Jihad group a product of other Middle Eastern nations, and the PFLP is obviously a Palestinian group. Though this is clear at face value, Senator Specter wanted to understand Syria and the Middle East on a deeper level.

After the 1947 Arab-Israeli war, in which Israel was established as a nation, Palestinians were forced out of what had been their homeland. After Hafez al-Asad came to power in Syria, Syria and Lebanon became the places of operation for Palestinians, both non-violent and terroristic. On a regional scale, Asad saw Lebanon as a part of a historical, “greater” Syria, causing him to want to control it.¹⁶ By exerting influence and control there, Asad believed he was progressing his aspiration towards a “Greater Syria” while also showing that Syria was an important player in the Middle East.¹⁷ By making Lebanon a sort of “buffer” state in which Syria funded various Arab groups, the Asad regime has been able to seemingly insulate themselves from direct linkage to terroristic, or more generally anti-western groups. A deeper look into

¹⁵ Arlen Specter Senatorial Papers: Group 2.

¹⁶ Maoz and Yaniv, *Syria Under Assad*, 180.

¹⁷ Maoz and Yaniv, *Syria Under Assad*, 181-182.

terroristic and militant groups in the Middle East, such as the PFLP, Hezbollah, and Fatah reveals ties to Syria, however. All of this harkens back to the desire of the Asad regime to hold leverage in any sort of negotiations by being a necessary point of contact.

This is not to say that the Asad regime has let these groups run amok within their borders. Regarding the PLO and its many branch organizations, the Asad regime has been willing to support them only on the condition that they subordinate themselves to Syria.¹⁸ Syria became a “parent state” to Lebanon and Jordan, more clearly for Palestinian factions living under Israeli occupation, but these relationships come second to the Syria-first mentality of the Asad regime.¹⁹ Asad preferred to be in control of his country, and this was certainly extended to the actions of the Palestinian groups within Syria. As Arabs, they were welcome in the Ba’athist, pan-Arab Syria, so long as they subordinated themselves to Asad and his rule.

Syria’s Role in the Middle East

As a senator, even one assigned to the committees that Specter was assigned to, focusing on Syria was not common. Syria was, at most, a regional player, even given its tendency to gravitate towards the Soviet sphere of influence. Under Hafez al-Asad, Syria has been practical, focused on its own domestic problems and one major regional interest, the Golan Heights, which Israel gained control of in 1967. Because the 1967 war ended in a ceasefire and was not ended with any sort of treaty or return of land that was gained, Asad and Syria have made the recovery of the Golan Heights their goal. Despite these factors, American politicians have traditionally seen the Middle East through a blindfold that focuses *solely* on Israel and Palestine.

At the most basic level, before political influence and diplomacy are considered, Arlen Specter had a positive personal relationship with the Asad regime – specifically its progenitor,

¹⁸ Maoz and Yaniv, *Syria Under Assad*, 192.

¹⁹ Hinnebusch, *Syria*, 141, 156-157.

Hafez al-Asad – that began soon after Specter came into office and lasted until he was voted out of office. The relationship was cemented by almost annual personal and senatorial business trips that Specter undertook to Syria, but it is clear that Specter and Asad’s relationship went beyond the mutually beneficial relationship of political collaborators. In a sense, such a prolonged relationship with such a notorious leader *had* to go beyond a working relationship. What is remarkable is the extent to which the relationship developed, despite their nations’ mutual distrust of each other.

The earliest mention of any sort of relationship with Syria, when looking at Specter’s legislative papers, comes in the same memo, mentioned earlier, that Specter sent to his friend Edward Rosen. The primary content of this letter was the assessment that Syria would not start another regional war, and while it was predicated on Specter’s travels, in 1983, to Israel, Egypt, and Rome – and not Syria – it is important to the formation of Specter’s career.²⁰ By assessing the willingness of Syria to go to war with Israel, Specter acknowledged Syria’s often-ignored influence in the region. Yes, the conflict was immediately an Israeli-Palestinian one in that most of the territorial claims were disputed between these two groups. But Syria also had territorial claims, and more importantly, they became a strong, enabling force behind Palestinian action after Asad’s rise to power. In 1995, Specter received a letter from two of his aides in response to a request he made of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin regarding “terroristic activity emanating out of Damascus”. The report itself notes that a number of terrorist groups call Syria home, making Syria an important political ally for these groups. While also noting that Syria gives support to these groups because it increases its clout across the region and increases the state’s diplomatic leverage, the report details the relationship between Syria and ten specific

²⁰ Arlen Specter Senatorial Papers: Group 2.

groups, such as Islamic Jihad, the PFLP, and Hezbollah.²¹ This request may seem related to Syria's designation as a state sponsor of terrorism, but it reflects a deeper understanding for Specter.

Arlen Specter understood that Syria played an important role in Middle Eastern affairs and that they also had considerable influence in the Israel-Palestinian conflict. In the above-mentioned report, the ten groups assessed for their relationship with Syria are as follows: Palestinian Islamic Jihad, the PFLP, the PLFP-General Command, the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), the Popular Struggle Front, the Palestinian Liberation Front, Fatah, Sai'qa, and Hezbollah.²² Apart from Hezbollah, the other nine organizations on this list are all Palestinian were name and affiliation, but none are considered "official" branches of the PLO. By nature, the PLO is a loosely based organization that has a number of "disparate elements with different views which are aided by governments, such as Syria, which oppose our peace process."²³ Groups like the PFLP, DFLP, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, while Palestinian, do not necessarily have the stamp of approval from the PLO, which is considered the voice for Palestinians, and Arlen Specter recognized this.

In 1991, Specter enunciated perhaps his most important opinion regarding the Middle East. As the Gulf War was coming to an end in the Middle East, then-President George H. W. Bush was speaking about the concept of a "new world order". In the spring of that year, the Jewish publication, *Israeli Democracy*, published an article titled "Finding Israel's Place in a New World Order", and this piece was an interview with Senator Specter on how he saw Israel playing a role in this new system that was being discussed. The content of the interview, as the

²¹ Arlen Specter Senatorial Papers: Group 2.

²² Ibid.

²³ Arlen Specter Senatorial Papers: Group 2.

title of the article portrays, is primarily focused on Israel and its role in the Middle East. There was one answer, however, in which Specter revealed his approach in the Middle East. The first question that Specter was asked was straightforward: “What, in your view, will be Israel’s role in a potential rearrangement of the Middle East?” Specter’s response was as follows:

I think Israel has a very significant role in terms of security in the region. This is something that I have long articulated. I have traveled extensively – to Syria four times and to Baghdad twice – and it has been my view ever since the conclusion of the Camp David accord, that if we could find a security arrangement between Iraq and Israel, and between Syria and Israel, the Palestinian problem and other problems in the Middle East would fall into place. Israel has a very prominent role and I think she has significantly enhanced her role first by maintaining a low profile for months and then by refraining from counter-attacking when the Iraqi missiles came in. Other Arab countries have not had an excuse to leave the coalition or declare war against Israel.²⁴

There is a lot in this answer that deserves analysis, but one specific line is crucial, and it is the part that reads, “if we could find a security arrangement between Syria and Israel, the Palestinian problem would fall into place.” Such a statement is more than a little naïve, but the fact that Specter went straight to mentioning Syria when asked a question about Israel’s role in the Middle East says a lot about Specter’s attitudes towards, and understanding of, the tensions in the Middle East.

Although this is a unique perspective to have, it would have meant nothing if Specter was unable to act upon it himself. Through his position on the Senate Committee on Appropriations, and its Foreign Operations Subcommittee, Specter was able to travel to the Middle East. By 2008, he had traveled to Syria seventeen times, with the first visit occurring in 1984.²⁵ In his travels, according to David Brog, Specter’s Chief of Staff in 2003, Specter had become “a go-between between Syria and Israel”, as well as an “emissary from the United States to whom the Syrians listen”. He was able to make some progress in bringing Asad and various Israeli leaders

²⁴ Arlen Specter Senatorial Papers: Group 2.

²⁵ Arlen Specter Senatorial Papers: Group 2.

to the negotiating table, while also balancing an individual relationship with Asad, whom Israel was at odds with.²⁶ This is remarkable in itself. As Brog recounted in an August 1996 memo to Specter, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu entrusted Specter with giving Asad a message, in the midst of increased tension between Hezbollah (in Lebanon) and Israel, that Israel had “only peaceful intentions towards Syria”. According to former Syrian Ambassador to the United States Walid al-Moualem, Specter’s efforts in August 1996 helped deescalate the situation and prevent more violence.²⁷

In addition to Specter’s work as go-between, Brog also recounted multiple instances where Specter relayed firm American policy to both Hafez and Bashar al-Asad. In 1996, the United States Air Force Barracks in Khobar, Saudi Arabia were attacked by Hezbollah al-Jehaz, the branch of Hezbollah that operated in that region of Saudi Arabia, known as the Hejaz.²⁸ Later that year, in a meeting with Hafez al-Asad, Senator Specter revealed that evidence of possible Syrian involvement in the Khobar Towers attack had come to light. He also reminded Asad that a similar situation occurred when evidence implicated Libya in the 1986 bombing of Pan Am Flight 103, which caused the United States to respond militarily.²⁹ Five years later, Hafez had died and his son Bashar had succeeded him, and in the summer of 2001, Bashar al-Asad made a statement publicly in which he condoned terrorism and targeting civilians, while also equating Zionism and Nazism. During a visit in 2002, Senator Specter met with Bashar and personally urged him to avoid supporting terrorism and avoid comparisons that would outrage the international community, imploring him to resume peace talks with Israel instead.³⁰ If this type

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Bruce Reidel, “Remembering the Khobar Towers Bombing,” *The Brookings Institution* (June 21, 2021) <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/06/21/remembering-the-khobar-towers-bombing/>.

²⁹ Arlen Specter Senatorial Papers: Group 2.

³⁰ Ibid.

of accountability were demanded from within the Syrian state, it would have been brutally repressed. Because Specter was an outsider that had built up a rapport and a genuine friendship with the regime, however, he was accorded a very unique opportunity on the world stage to which his colleagues did not come close if they were to want to.

Unlikely Friends

In general terms, the fact that Specter traveled to Syria seventeen times in twenty-four years is significant. The Asad regime had been ostracized by the United States and many of its allies, so it is logical to reason that the regime was at least moderately resistant to the efforts of any western politician. Once Specter got past this initial roadblock, the relationship could have failed to develop into anything positive. This is also not the case with Specter and is revealed in the most bizarre piece of material from Specter's legislative career.

In 1993, Senator Specter received a personal, handwritten valentine from President Hafez al-Asad. The note itself is heart-shaped, and contains the following message: "Dear Arlen, I am one of your secret admirers, and remember our 4 meetings well. Consequently, missing you this time was a great disappointment, but I was unavoidably detained by some important interrogations. Arlen, really, why do so many people want to leave my country? We could use a few good men like you. Love, President Assad."³¹

Erring on the side of caution, this letter should not be over-interpreted. It is reasonable to assume that Asad was trying to fit in with the western custom of sending valentines on Valentine's Day. Also, one could read too much into the content of Asad's letter in an attempt to ascertain the realities of Syria at the time. At base, this personal note legitimized the relationship that existed between Specter and Asad. Such a letter would not have been sent if their

³¹ Arlen Specter Senatorial Papers: Group 2.

relationship was merely a working, diplomatic arrangement; personal correspondence, especially of this nature, would not occur. At its most basic level of assessment, the handwritten valentine that Hafez al-Asad sent to Arlen Specter objectively illustrates the deeper personal bond that the men shared, making Specter's work in the Middle East even more interesting.

One domestic problem that the Asad regime has had to constantly consider is Islamic resistance, specifically in the form of the Muslim Brotherhood. The Brotherhood formed in Syria in the 1940s but started to focus on strengthening themselves politically and militarily following the Ba'ath Party coup in Syria in 1963. As with the PLO, the Muslim Brotherhood has some splinter groups that vary in methodologies. A particularly militant branch of the group, known as "Tali'a al-Muqatila", or Fighting Vanguard in English, advocated for military resistance to the Asad regime, while other Brotherhood leaders wanted to engage the regime in dialogue to reduce its repressive tendencies.³² In general, however, the Muslim Brotherhood opposed the Asad regimes leadership of Ba'ath Party members as well as its repression and widespread punishment techniques. To squash this resistance, Hafez al-Asad decided, in 1979, to wage military campaigns against the Muslim Brotherhood, specifically in cities where the Brotherhood had strong influence, like Aleppo and Hama.³³ Regime policy resulted in thousands of arrests, brutal torture, and many executions over the next three years, but things would get even worse in 1982.³⁴

After years of attempts to repress the Muslim Brotherhood, Asad and his lieutenants decided to ratchet up the pressure by instigating a large attack on Hama. Hafez himself said, to a group of troops in training, that "this has to be complete eradication ... and through effective

³² Dagher, *Assad or We Burn the Country*, 228.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Dagher, *Assad or We Burn the Country*, 229-230.

revolutionary methods, all traces of this gang [Muslim Brotherhood] must be eradicated.”³⁵ Over about two weeks, regime forces effectively swept through Hama and eliminated the entirety of the Muslim Brotherhood threat, about 20,000 people, ending the Asad regime’s most brutal example of the repression of its own people.

Eight years later, as tensions increased in the Middle East before the outbreak of the Gulf War, Arlen Specter wrote to then-Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney about missile capabilities in the Middle East. Primarily, Specter was concerned with ensuring that Israel did not become outpaced militarily, but this focus was also considerate of Syria’s progress on military matters as well. Specter noted in the letter that Syria and Iraq had developed effective missile programs, which was known at the time. Specter then focused on Syria, referencing the Hama massacre in which the Asad regime had killed 20,000 of its own people, also mentioning reports that the Asad regime was arming its missiles with chemical warheads.³⁶ By this time, Specter had travelled to Syria a few times, so the relationship between him and Asad was in the developing stages. Despite this inroad into relations with an ostracized nation, Specter was not ignorant of Syria’s dangerous advances in the Middle East and how it affected the Middle East and United States policy there. This specific letter to Cheney was to support funding for the Arrow Defense Program in Israel, and the growth of Syria’s missile capabilities was used to show the immediate risk to Israel, but it also shows Specter’s nuanced understanding of Israeli-Syrian tensions.

Though all of these Syrian policies and actions seem contradictory and even reckless at times, they center on the main goals of the Asad regime: to regain control of the Golan Heights and to be a regional power broker. The prevailing notion in general assessments of the Middle East is that it is a region plagued by ethnic and religious tension, and Syria is viewed as a key

³⁵ Dagher, *Assad or We Burn the Country*, 231.

³⁶ Arlen Specter Senatorial Papers: Group 2.

part of this friction. As an important part of three of the five Arab-Israeli wars, and the nation that has been designated a state sponsor of terrorism by the United States for the longest amount of time, US attitudes towards Syria have tended to be similar to those towards Palestinians and the PLO in that they have been reluctant to negotiate directly with the Asad regime. Because the Asad regime seems to not contribute to the prospect of peace in the Middle East or in the world, western leaders and politicians have written Syria off. Such a policy encouraged a link between Syria and the Soviet Union, making Syria a part of the Cold War-focused agenda that was prevalent in the United States until the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991. This combination of Soviet friendliness and anti-Israel sentiment that manifested itself in the Asad regime ensured that the United States would rarely include Syria in its mainstream diplomatic efforts

Arlen Specter, an officially Republican senator who was more independent in practice, involved himself in Middle Eastern affairs shortly after coming into office. The region's constant conflict existed between Israel and Palestine, who had claims to the same land. Commonly viewed as an issue only involving Israel and Palestine, there was more to it than that. Since coming to power in Syria, Hafez al-Asad, his son Bashar, and their entire regime has viewed Israel as its primary enemy. Israel took control of the Golan Heights in 1967, which is land that Syria believes is rightfully theirs and which is legally recognized by the United Nations as part of Syria. Beyond this, Syria has supported Palestinians and their efforts to reclaim their homeland, often allowing the PLO and its proxy organizations to operate freely both in Syria and in Lebanon, where Syria exerts considerable influence. In short, Syria, in its own view, has much at stake with regards to Israel and Palestine, and this has made Syria an important, though often ignored, third party in Israel-Palestinian peace discussions.

In his roles on the Senate Committee on Appropriations and that committees Subcommittee on Foreign Operations, Senator Arlen Specter was able to practice diplomacy in the way that he thought it should be done. He travelled across the world, but one area to which he returned often was the Middle East. This fact alone set Specter apart from his fellow Congressmen, since Syria had been considered a state sponsor of terrorism since 1979, but it did not signify the end of the path that Specter was forging. It was not enough for Specter to be one of the only western politicians to visit Syria; he wanted to use the opportunity to work towards reaching a lasting peace in the Middle East. Specter himself was very interested in the Israeli-Palestinian issue, and he was also unique in the fact that he perceived Syria's role in the conflict. His self-proclaimed belief on the issue was that "if we could find a security arrangement between Syria and Israel, ... the Palestinian problem would fall into place", and he followed this philosophy throughout his work in the region.³⁷

To study the Middle East, specifically the tensions between Israel and Syria, is a complex task. Utilizing the career of Arlen Specter helps to provide a unique perspective on the region. As a United States senator, Specter had no immediate stake in the Middle East beyond what prevailing American policy advocated for. Over a twenty-five-year period, Senator Specter was able to develop a personal bond with Syrian Presidents Hafez and Bashar al-Asad while leveraging these relationships in attempts to bring about progress in Middle Eastern peace. While he was just one senator and was inevitably limited in the change he could bring about on his own, Arlen Specter displayed a deep understanding of Middle Eastern politics, exemplified by his interest in considering Syria as an integral part of the peace process.

³⁷ Arlen Specter Senatorial Papers: Group 2.

Conclusion

A region with a turbulent history, the Middle East has been particularly volatile since the end of the Great War, as empires collapsed, and independence movements spread across the region. With new nations came a new diplomatic knot that was tightening as American involvement in the Middle East increased. Israel, the region's only democratic country, became a natural ally for the United States, but at first, American presidents and statesmen did not want to sacrifice relations with the Middle East's Arab nations. As regional wars occurred – five different wars were fought between Arab countries and Israel between 1947 and 1982 – American politicians focused on Israel as *the* ally in the Middle East, especially after 1967. Essentially, Israel's security became a high priority in American diplomacy, with over a billion dollars being allocated for aid to Israel on an annual basis.

By focusing on Israel, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict became a big part of American policy in the Middle East. Israelis and Palestinians have claim to the same land, and in 1947, after the UN declared that the lands that the two groups lay claim to would be split into a Jewish state and a Palestinian state, a civil war broke out. Since before the Second World War, both Israelis and Palestinians have seen the other group as illegitimate, making the two-state declaration impossible to accept for either party, since it gave legitimacy to the opposite group. Palestine and its allies were defeated in this war, causing many to flee from what became Israel to neighboring Arab states. Syria and Lebanon became places of Palestinian migration, since these two countries bordered Israel and enabled Palestinians to continue the efforts to get their land back from Israel. Thus, Syria might be considered very important in making any progress on the Israeli-Palestinian front – or at least it was to Arlen Specter.

Syria has been an independent nation since 1946, but it has been a major regional player since the 1963 Ba'ath Party Revolution which was then followed by the "Corrective Revolution" that Hafez al-Asad initiated in 1970. Very practical when it came to regional politics, the Asad regime established considerable influence in Lebanon before allowing the PLO to operate in these countries. Essentially, the Asad regime wanted to have leverage with the west, and since the PLO opposed Israel, who was a strong western ally, the Asad regime saw the benefits of enabling the PLO. This policy has continued on under Hafez's son, Bashar, who has been considered an enabler of terrorist groups. Put simply, the Asad regime has aligned Syria with various groups, such as the PLO or Hezbollah, not out of ideological affinity necessarily, but because of its desire for leverage.

As Chapter One highlights, the history of the Middle East and the American foreign policy that has been enacted there is complex and convoluted. Without a tighter focus, analysis would continue ad infinitum. By analyzing the career and work of Arlen Specter and using it as a lens to view the Middle East, contextualization and understanding is possible.

Arlen Specter served in the United States Senate for thirty years, from 1981 to 2011. When he came into office, a status quo with regard to Israel, Palestine, and Syria had been established. Israel, supported by the United States, had cemented its control over its land. The Palestinian population lived in a truncated version of its UN-mandated territory, specifically the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and Syria had been under the Asad regime for eleven years. In his positions on the Senate Committee on Appropriations and this committee's Subcommittee on Foreign Operations, Specter quickly became familiar with American goals and policies across the world. He paid particular interest to the Middle East, travelling there multiple times. Politically, Specter was an independent-thinking politician. From running, as a Democrat, for

District Attorney in Philadelphia under the Republican ticket in 1965 to voting, as a Republican, to acquit Democratic President Bill Clinton in his impeachment trial in 1999, there are many examples of Specter's political independence, and Middle Eastern diplomacy is another prime example.

Chapter Two discussed the prevailing American attitudes in the Middle East, which viewed the support of Israel as essential, especially in more recent years. While Specter did help to further strengthen the bonds between the two nations by strongly advocating for substantial aid to Israel, the simple supply of aid was not enough for him in terms of securing peace in the region. On multiple occasions, Specter met with Yasser Arafat, Chairman of the PLO, in the hopes of brokering more substantial developments in Israeli-Palestinian affairs. While likely a tad egotistical in nature, seeing as Arafat was ostracized in the west, Specter's consideration of the Palestinian point of view shows an independent desire to improve relations between the two groups. His actions are also somewhat contradictory, but he was one of only a few politicians across the world that considered the PLO legitimate enough to parley with and he acted on it.

Moreover, as Chapter Three details, Specter came to understand that the Israeli-Palestinian problem was not solely relegated to just those two groups. Because Palestinians did not have a 'homeland', they had to operate out of other Middle Eastern nations, such as Syria and Lebanon. Because Syria was active in Lebanese affairs, they became an enabler of Palestinian actions, however benign or belligerent these actions were. The easiest way to understand Specter's views on the conflict between Israel and Palestine came in an interview he did in 1991 in which he asserted his belief that "a security arrangement between Syria and Israel" would cause the Palestinian problem "to fall into place."³⁸ Naiveté aside, this belief was

³⁸ Arlen Specter Senatorial Papers: Group 2.

profoundly unique to Specter, and it is important to note that he acted upon it. Between 1984 and 2008, Specter travelled to Syria on seventeen different occasions, developing a personal friendship with Hafez al-Asad in the process. Syria has been on the United States' State Sponsors of Terrorism list since 1979, but Specter was still able to develop a rapport with Asad in the hopes of achieving peace between Israel, Palestine, and Syria.

In his thirty-year career in the Senate, Arlen Specter forged his own path in Middle Eastern diplomacy. While supportive of broad American views and goals, Specter saw the Middle East as an opportunity to make a name for himself. He travelled to the region many times, establishing friendly relations with Hafez al-Asad and Yasser Arafat, who both had been ostracized by the international community. Unfortunately, Arlen Specter was just one of many politicians involved in the formulation of American foreign policy, so he was not able to help bring about wholesale progress in the region. While motivated in part by arrogance, Specter's role in the American political system impeded his ambition for fame. Nonetheless, Arlen Specter's work in the Middle East brings to light the unique experiences of a long-serving senator while also providing insight into the complexities of Middle Eastern diplomacy.

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