



Presidential Report Card: Who Scored The Best In Arab-Israeli Diplomacy?

George H. W. Bush – 41st President of the United States – 1989 to 1993

Capitalizing on the success of the First Gulf War, President Bush joined his Russian counterparts to co-sponsor the Madrid Conference of 1991, marking the first time Israel publicly sat down with her neighbors to discuss a multilateral peace deal. While few tangible achievements can be linked to the conference, it represented a watershed in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as lines of communication as well as a framework for dialogue were established in Madrid.

“Bush 41 had the clearest sense of strategy, which the administration pursued in a highly disciplined, committed, and effective manner. Diplomacy was active and sustained, emanating from policy that the president prioritized and clearly articulated.” (Negotiating Arab-Israeli Peace, Kurtzer & Lasensky, USIP Press, Page 15)

“The Bush 41 administration deserves credit for taking a firm stance on settlement expansion, an issue that had long undermined Arab trust in the peace process and increased Israel’s own vulnerabilities. However, by carrying over this policy disagreement into an all-out confrontation with the organized U.S. Jewish community, the administration weakened its ability to play an active role later on.” (Ibid, Page 17)

J Street U Grade: (A-)

- *for keeping focused with the high profile and highly empowered Secretary Baker as envoy (+)*
- *for being firm on the settlements issue (+)*
- *for failing to sell his opposition to the settlements to the American Jewish community (-)*

Bill Clinton – 42nd President of the United States – 1993 to 2001

Bill Clinton was presented with a Middle East that was ripe for peacemaking. But after inheriting a positive era following the success of the Oslo Accords, the Clinton administration’s participation and monitoring of the situation was non-existent for over 2 years until the second term of his presidency. The Clinton team made other attempts to bridge the divides with assistance in securing the Oslo II agreement in 1995 and the 1998 Wye Summit bringing Benjamin Netanyahu and Arafat together in an attempt to save the peace process but missteps as well as bad timing proved fatal once again.

“During the Clinton presidency, the United States enjoyed enhanced prestige in the region and on the international stage, and Arab-Israeli peacemaking was the centerpiece of the Clinton team’s regional strategy. Members of the administration understood the primary assignment to the peace process and shared a common commitment. In contrast to Bush 41, Clinton built a strong and diverse domestic coalition to support U.S. leadership in the peace process.” (Ibid, Page 17)

“However, the Clinton approach was less disciplined and less strategic than was Bush 41’s, and our study group heard from both Israeli and Arab officials that the administration’s approach appeared to lack focus and follow-through ... Moreover, the administration knew about but largely ignored – and thus failed to shape – the secret contacts between Israel and the PLO that were to result in the Oslo accords.” (Ibid, Page 17-18)

“The most glaring failure of this period was the ill-conceived Camp David II summit in July 2000, for which Clinton brought Barak and Arafat to the presidential retreat to sign a framework agreement on a final peace treaty. After nearly two weeks, the summit collapsed with no agreement. A contributing factor to the failure of Camp David, and U.S. diplomacy more generally, was a policy process that was too insular and inhibited the development of U.S. positions on the core issues. Therefore, it was not surprising that when negotiations eventually reached this stage, the United States was unprepared, and our negotiators scrambled at the last minute to put together U.S. positions on complex issues such as Jerusalem and borders.” (Ibid, Page 21)

J Street U Grade – First Term: (B-)

J Street U Grade – Second Term: (A-)

- *for building a strong base of U.S. support for policy agenda (+)*
- *for disengaging from efforts to closely monitor the post-Oslo era (-)*
- *for allowing the domestic concerns, especially those of the Israelis, to trump smart policy (-)*

George W. Bush – 43rd President of the United States – 2001 to 2009

Resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict never occupied a significant substantive spot on President George W. Bush's foreign policy agenda. While his administration did inherit a situation that was significantly less amenable to peace than did his predecessor, a number of missteps and missed opportunities derailed efforts to better manage the Israeli-Palestinian conflict during the Bush 43 presidency.

“The Bush 43 approach to the conflict lacked both commitment and a sense of strategic purpose. Some in the administration dismissed the importance of the Arab-Israeli conflict, suggesting that it was subsidiary to removing the Saddam Hussein regime and pressing for far-reaching social and political reforms in the Arab world. The road to Jerusalem, it was argued, went through Baghdad. Most damaging to U.S. interests, Bush 43 policies left the widely held perception that the United States had disengaged from active peacemaking. This impression influenced not only the prospects for peace but also severely eroded the United States’ regional standing.” (Ibid, Page 21)

“Despite a very negative environment for peacemaking in 2001-2002, opportunities presented themselves in the form of the Mitchell Report (April 2001) and the impact of September 11 on regional attitudes, but the Bush 43 administration did not respond. Throughout his two terms, Bush 43 failed to create or exploit other opportunities, such as the Arab League peace initiative that led to the Beirut Declaration, the election of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, or the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza. Overall, the administration appeared content to articulate policy positions and then move to the sidelines and await outcomes ... When major initiatives were put forward, as with the Roadmap peace plan in 2003, they were not aggressively pursued, not monitored, and lacked sustained diplomatic engagement.” (Ibid, Page 21)

“There was activity during the Bush 43 years – including the abovementioned Roadmap initiative, the appointment of several envoys, and summit meetings – but being busy is not the same as being actively engaged and moving the peace process forward. By effectively moving to the sidelines during these years, the United States did not increase the pressure on the parties to reach their own solution. Instead the divide between Arabs and Israelis widened.” (Ibid, Page 22)

UPZ Grade – First Term: (D-)

UPZ Grade – Second Term: (C-)

- *for disengaging near completely from substantive efforts to make peace (-)*
- *for allowing the domestic concerns, especially those of the Israelis, to trump smart policy (-)*
- *for failing to capitalize on and create multiple opportunities (-)*