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Israeli Diplomacy
in the
Back Channel



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
The Default Option	2
The Kissinger Workshop	4
Motivations: Inside and Outside	6
Public Diplomacy and Bureaucratic Politics	9
Necessity, Midwife to Inventiveness	10
Necessity Weds Convenience	14
Exclusionary Politics, Israeli Style	15
Domestic Costs of Backchanneling	18
Back-Channel Bedfellows	25
The 1987 London Document	28
Backchanneling: A Balance Sheet	38
Is There a Future for Backchanneling?	39

INTRODUCTION

An important feature of Israel's approach to international relations in general, and to Middle East peacemaking in particular, is what *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman calls "half-secret, half-public twilight diplomacy."¹ Indeed, the topic of diplomatic back channels sheds much light on how Israel has gone about conducting its foreign relations for a half-century and more.

In resigning as foreign minister on 2 August 2000, David Levy cited as one primary reason his inability to live with, or explain, the use of "various odd channels" by Prime Minister Ehud Barak as part of Middle East peacemaking. In effect, Levy was taking issue with, while drawing our attention to, the procedures and not only the substance of policymaking.

Israel's style of furtive "backchanneling" has never been systematically studied, and may never be thoroughly catalogued. This is largely because of the very nature of quiet diplomacy,² as well as the "top secret" classification stamped on the bulk of Israeli official state papers in the realm of regional and overseas contacts. Yet, relatively speaking, and somewhat surprisingly, even less is known about backchanneling's theoretical meaning or place in contemporary global affairs. Thus, despite constant references both in the daily media and the scholarly literature, as of now there is no commonly accepted, let alone scientific working definition of "back

1 Thomas L. Friedman, "The Twilight Zone," *New York Times*, 25 June 1995.

2 On the special nature of secret diplomacy, and its use by Israel, see Aharon Klieman, *Statecraft in the Dark: Israel's Practice of Quiet Diplomacy* (Tel Aviv: Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, 1988).

2 | Aharon Klieman

channel” statecraft. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to bridge the general and the theoretical by considering case-specific and verifiable Israeli experiences in discreet backchanneling.

When or where both the term and the practice originated is uncertain. What we do know is that concepts such as “backchanneling” and “constructive ambiguity”³ are closely associated with the “new diplomacy.”⁴ A major subject for today’s student of statecraft ought to be what former American statesman Harold Saunders terms “the politics of getting to negotiation,”⁵ as well as the question raised by G. R. Berridge: “How does one talk to the enemy?”⁶

THE DEFAULT OPTION

“Back channel” – the term itself provides a pair of preliminary insights. The first is that while in principle there are multiple lines of open contact and formal communication between respective parties, the mere reference to an unconventional back channel can only imply that the alternative of a conventional or *front* channel is either temporarily inoperative or else deemed politically inopportune at the moment.

A second basic insight, therefore, is that backchanneling is a

3 See the author’s *Constructive Ambiguity in Middle East Peacemaking* (Tel Aviv: Tami Steinmetz Center for Peace Research, 1999).

4 Abba Eban, *The New Diplomacy* (New York: Random House, 1983).

5 Harold H. Saunders, *The Other Walls: The Politics of the Arab-Israeli Peace Process* (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1985), p. 5.

6 G. R. Berridge, *Talking to the Enemy: How States without “Diplomatic Relations” Communicate* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1994), p. xiii.

particular form of *secret* or *quiet* diplomacy, since, much like the suggestive “*back door*,” when any two parties find it necessary to activate a back channel they are signaling a certain reticence and reserve in their relationship. As a rule, for back-channel statecraft to work properly it must be conducted with utmost discretion and tact. In effect, backchanneling accords well with the post-Wilsonian compromise formula of pragmatic diplomatists: “open agreements, secretly arrived at.”

These initial observations lead, in turn, to either of three negotiating situations:

- Backchanneling as *substitute*: When an accessible front channel may actually not exist. This occurs in cases where traditional cobelligerents have never entered official relations, or have formally severed them with the outbreak of hostilities.
- Backchanneling as *backup*: When an additional avenue is pursued serially, alternating with existing front channels when the latter, for whatever reason, are temporarily obstructed. In such a situation the back channel is used in order to get a derailed process back on track through recircuiting or “recycling” it.
- Backchanneling as *concurrent*: As in the case of a particularly sensitive and contentious issue that is better dealt with by holding unpublicized discussions.

However viewed, and in whichever capacity used, the back channel is the statesman’s highly serviceable default option; a reserve conduit and fallback communications grid. Note that the cumulative Israeli experience features all three

types of backchanneling: substitutional, supplemental, and simultaneous.

THE KISSINGER WORKSHOP

Wherever lie its origins and antecedents in late modern European diplomatic history, more recently the notion of backchanneling is closely associated with the thinking, the style, and the person of Henry Kissinger. Through his activist 1970s statecraft, public pronouncements, and later writings—especially his magisterial three-volume autobiography⁷—the former U.S. secretary of state assertively dominated American and global affairs. For the better part of a decade he helped legitimize the practice of backchanneling, converting it into something of a diplomatic art form.

One remembers, of course, his dazzling opening to Beijing in 1972 via the now-famous “Pakistani back channel.” No less impressive and instructive, however, is his application of the same technique to the Middle East. Indeed, by early 1973, as President Nixon’s national security adviser at the time, he had managed to deftly orchestrate no less than three tracks simultaneously in quest of an interim Israeli-Egyptian disengagement along the Suez Canal:

- One channel centering on Secretary of State William Rogers

⁷ Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979); *Years of Upheaval* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1982); *Years of Renewal* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999).

and official government-to-government efforts by the State Department in Cairo and Tel Aviv

- A second channel activated between Kissinger and Hafiz Ismail, Egyptian President Sadat's personal emissary, to which Rogers was not privy, and that kept all pertinent cable traffic redirected away from State Department personnel
- A third dialogue ("the Channel") conducted by Kissinger with Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin in Washington, with both men maintaining close informal consultation on a joint U.S.-USSR approach to the Middle East

After the 1973 Yom Kippur War as well, key once-and-future Israeli decisionmakers such as Yigal Allon, Moshe Dayan,⁸ Simcha Dinitz, Shimon Peres, and Yitzhak Rabin in effect became eager participants in Kissinger's ongoing seminar on shuttle diplomacy and multiple communications circuitry (today's "networking"). Especially impressive for an Israeli audience was his deft manipulation of two-tiered and three-tiered channels, sticking to the peace processor's manual of "keeping as many balls in the air as possible."⁹

8 One of the more colorful published sources is the late Foreign Minister Moshe Dayan's anecdotal firsthand account of his secret visits to Iran, India, and Morocco as well as his back-channel meeting with President Anwar Sadat's personal emissary Hassan Tuhami, in Moshe Dayan, *Breakthrough* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981).

9 Then as now, Israeli backchannelers could draw further inspiration from a tradition of "working the back doors" in a prestate Zionist diplomacy antedating Kissinger. Much insight can be derived from Theodor Herzl's courting of countless European statesmen on behalf of a renascent Jewish nationalism; Chaim Weizmann's backdoor contacts in London, smoothing the way for the British cabinet's 1917 Balfour Declaration; and his repeat performance during 1947-1948 in effectively soliciting President Truman's endorsement for Jewish statehood by closing the door on a declining and no longer sympathetic Britain and focusing instead on getting a foot in the White House (back) door.

MOTIVATIONS: INSIDE AND OUTSIDE

Why this strong penchant for the back channels by practicing Israeli statesmen? Is it need-based or simply a matter of convenience, of personal preference? And what is it about contemporary international relations, or perhaps within the diplomatic profession at large, that accounts for backchanneling's increased frequency and dramatic rise in popularity, for Israel but also worldwide?

Standard explanations for secrecy (and by extension, backchanneling) are either single-factor and restrictive in nature or else too vague to be of any precise help. Thus, for instance, Berridge offers at least three reasons for preferring secret emissaries to formal envoys:¹⁰

- (1) One can avoid “appearing to the world” as a supplicant before one’s enemy.
- (2) It becomes easier to reverse course should no common ground be found between the negotiating parties.
- (3) Publicity could cause “embarrassment” or invite “sabotage.”

The first two fall under the category of foreign policy concerns; the last—embarrassment and sabotage—lends itself to dual interpretation, although the connotation and context once again clearly suggest outside, foreign considerations: a blow to one’s international prestige; sabotage inflicted by one’s regional or global rivals in defending themselves against disequilibrium in the prevailing balance of power.

¹⁰ Berridge, pp. 104-105.

For most of us, conditioned by conventional wisdom, the initial tendency is almost automatically to respond by citing first, or exclusively, the *external* considerations. Invariably, the standard argument on behalf of secret back-channel diplomacy is made on grounds of necessity and *raison d'état*—namely, those foreign policy political exigencies arising from the statesman's international operational environment.

Promoting international order in the post-Cold War era is certainly one leading systemic priority in recent years. Another task high on the global agenda consists of (a) studying the causes of war, and (b) bringing outside influence to bear in limiting the frequency, intensity, and duration of lethal conflicts.

There is, for example, a far greater awareness at present of the need for proactive diplomacy, with global interventionists assigning high priority to abating deadly disputes and terminating enduring rivalries, whether of the ethnic-civil-war or interstate variety.¹¹ Whatever the aim of outside intermediaries—prevention, amelioration, management, or resolution of conflict—all four phases are equally well served by any stratagem that helps to facilitate exploratory probes, encourage dialogue, and jump-start prenegotiation among badly estranged, highly suspicious parties.

As borne out in the scholarly literature, it is these two levels of analysis—*systemic* factors and *two-player* games—that provide the compelling rationale for backchanneling. Both

11 Two useful treatments from among many are: Bruce W. Jentleson (ed.), *Opportunities Missed, Opportunities Seized: Preventive Diplomacy in the Post-Cold War World* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict, 2000); Paul Huth, *Standing Your Ground* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998).

today's theoretical discourse and international diplomacy are heavily spiced with terms like "Track 2 diplomacy" and "chains of communication," "mutually hurting stalemates" and "mutually enticing opportunities,"¹² "confidence-building measures" and "bridging formulas," "third-party intervention," "peacemaking" and "peacebuilding," "war termination" and "reconciliation." One readily senses how instrumental backchanneling practices fit so comfortably the prevailing "ends (peaceful accommodation) justify means (diplomatic deception)" ethos. In short, larger, worldwide patterns and concerns are what explains the world statesman's propensity for working through secret channels.

I am no longer quite so impressed, however, by the systemic argument or convinced of its explanatory power. Diplomacy is concerned "with the management of relations between states and between states and other actors"¹³—but not only that. Instead, the Israeli experience persuades me of a second, no less powerful consideration behind backchanneling: not only systemic constraints but, at one level of analysis further removed: states, and state behavior.

12 The term "mutually enticing opportunities" is introduced by I. William Zartman in his important essay, "Mediating Conflicts of Need, Greed and Creed," *Orbis*, Summer 2000, pp. 255-266, and contrasted with his earlier concept of "mutually hurting stalemates."

13 R. P. Barston, *Modern Diplomacy* (New York: Longman Group, 1988), p. 1.

PUBLIC DIPLOMACY AND BUREAUCRATIC POLITICS

Without gainsaying the impact of worldwide trends and interstate relations, *domestic* policymaking considerations nonetheless have a robust logic of their own that reinforces, not replaces, those systemic inputs. This logic maintains that if in fact proceeding along back channels is becoming the preferred approach for governments, negotiators, and peacemakers, it is foremost for internal, political reasons—or, more narrowly, reasons of bureaucratic politics.

To an appreciable extent, “new diplomacy” is “public diplomacy.” Hence, effective conflict bargaining clashes with the demanding standards and procedures of democratic policymaking. For one thing is clear: in the name of, first, consensus, and second, accountability, democracy knowingly encourages (a) wider *public* participation in foreign affairs, and (b) deeper ongoing involvement by competitive *government* agencies in the making and execution of foreign policy.

To be sure, organizational “turf wars” and the common practice of keeping other bureaucratic players “out of the loop” were hardly a consideration in the classical era of “old” diplomacy. In the age of Richelieu, de Callieres, and Benjamin Franklin, and even as late as Sir Harold Nicolson’s time, professional statecraft put a premium on personalized, often solitary efforts on behalf of one’s sovereign. Rather than being a group exercise, missions abroad were entrusted to sole envoys, and an ambassador’s credentials really meant “extraordinary and plenipotentiary.” Seen in this light, backchanneling needs to be analyzed within an *internal* context, and as part of what might be termed “the politics of exclusion.”

In sum, this paper's central thesis is that domestic political incentives, ranging from the personal to the institutional and procedural, must be given separate attention and equal weight alongside backchanneling's external, diplomatic motives. Particularly helpful is the wider, more inclusive perspective provided us by Harold Saunders. The former Middle East diplomatist rightly stresses the "*politics* of the peace process," pointing out that a peace process "is more than conventional diplomacy and negotiation. It encompasses a full range of *political*, psychological, economic, diplomatic and military negotiations woven together"¹⁴ (emphasis added).

An adjunct of secrecy and multiple-track communication, backchanneling has become an integral part of the modern-day mechanics of negotiation. But it also represents a direct link between politics and diplomacy—which is as good an insight as any in introducing the topic of Israeli backchanneling practices.

NECESSITY, MIDWIFE TO INVENTIVENESS

To be sure, quiet diplomacy is a technique and the back channel an avenue at the disposal of all international actors, state and nonstate alike,¹⁵ so that Israel is hardly

¹⁴ Saunders, p. 3.

¹⁵ For example, backchanneling between two "insiders working from the outside" (someone with close links to the PLO, Mohamed Rabie, and former NSC staffer William Quandt of the Brookings Institution) played a part in opening the U.S.-PLO dialogue in 1988 and thus charting a new political path. See Mohamed Rabie, *Secret Diplomacy and Conflict Resolution* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1995).

exceptional.¹⁶ Indeed, the diplomatic back door is a far more common, everyday occurrence than one might assume. On the other hand, however, “statecraft in the dark”—both the secrecy and the back channel—plays a singularly important role in Israel’s case. Judging even from the limited open files on Israeli foreign and security affairs, backchanneling has been used to an inordinate extent. Why?

A first line of defense fully dovetails with the standard interpretation given above of compelling external-systemic-environmental factors, yet has particular resonance in Israeli diplomatic annals. Back-channel statecraft is prudent statecraft, and Israel is, if anything, a quintessentially prudent international state actor.

Objectively, what readily stands out in Jerusalem’s foreign policy calculus is the situational variable.¹⁷ That the Jewish state has been confronted by existential threats from its birth in 1948 and continues to live in a hostile Middle East threat environment is incontrovertible. Full-scale conflicts with the Arab world and recurrent crises punctuate the country’s political history. Equally

16 The debate over Israeli exceptionalism is represented in the different positions defended, respectively, by Michael N. Barnett (ed.), *Israel in Comparative Perspective: Challenging the Conventional Wisdom* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996); Barnett, “The Politics of Uniqueness: The Status of the Israeli Case,” pp. 3-25, and Gil Merom, “Outside History? Israel’s Security Dilemma in a Comparative Perspective,” in Daniel Bar-Tal, Dan Jacobson, and Aharon Klieman (eds.), *Concerned with Security: Learning from Israel’s Experience* (Greenwich, Conn.: JAI Press, 1998); Gil Merom, “Israel’s National Security and the Myth of Exceptionalism,” *Political Science Quarterly* 114, 3 (1999): 409-434.

17 This was underlined by Michael Brecher in his pioneering two-volume study of the first two crisis-prone decades of Israel’s history: *The Foreign Policy System of Israel* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972); *Decisions in Israel’s Foreign Policy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974). In addition to the situational variable, especially in crisis situations, Brecher’s analytical model heavily emphasizes the formal structures and procedures of policymaking, giving the impression of an orderly “system” closely adhered to at all times.

apparent is the gravity of its own particular “security dilemma”: at the lower escalatory level of low-intensity conflict, by a possible repeat of the 1987 Intifada and random Palestinian acts of terrorism ratcheting up to conventional-warfare scenarios; at the highest level, by redoubled Iraqi efforts at developing a nonconventional chemical and biological arsenal together with a credible missile delivery capability, and, no less, by Iranian progress toward a nuclear option.

To this are added the compelling diplomatic arguments for secret back channels. To begin with, Israel has known and had to contend with long periods of estrangement, ostracism, and isolation. By definition, such “outcast” or “pariah” states on the fringes of the international community may not have the luxury of taking the preferred diplomatic high road, and this does not leave many options. And yet, second, like any other sovereign state, Israel throughout has had vital national interests that need to be protected and, better still, promoted. Some of these, such as prisoner-of-war exchanges, oil imports, arms acquisitions or transfers, and peace breakthroughs, are sensitive in the extreme and therefore better suited to less direct, less publicized means.

Third, and not least, it should be kept in mind that the insistence on back channels often comes not from Jerusalem but from Israel’s would-be partners. It is the latter—foreign governments—that most incline to make their conversations and meetings with Israeli interlocutors strictly conditional. The condition, of course, is that their unofficial back-channel dealings, no matter how businesslike, go unreported, and thus remain plausibly deniable.

Hence, the initial dialectic behind Israeli backchanneling is

the dialectic of external necessity. My aim is not to disqualify this line of argumentation; on the contrary, were it not for quiet diplomacy and successful backchanneling, Israel's international position and vital interests might today be on considerably shakier ground. Indeed, one of the distinct drawbacks of backchanneling for researchers is that, lacking the full diplomatic picture, we can never begin to ascertain what potential threats or political mishaps may have been averted by recourse to *preventive* backstage interventions. Thus, critics (both at home and abroad) of Israel's handling of foreign relations should at least acknowledge that our assessments are restricted to the unclassified public record, which represents the tip of the diplomatic iceberg.

Rather than dismiss situational exigencies, the point I wish to make is that a second logic—not founded on external necessity—has greater analytical and explanatory power. The Middle East military balance and Israel's markedly improved international status surely argue for a comparable lessening of its resort to clandestine back channels. Yet evidence suggests no appreciable redirection of diplomatic energies to the front channel, and, if anything, an actual increase in backchanneling, as witnessed in 2000 with the "Stockholm channel" that was opened concurrent with formal, direct Israeli-Palestinian negotiations taking place in the region over final-status issues. Our search, therefore, takes us to Israel's domestic political front, which supplies the missing set of incentives.

NECESSITY WEDS CONVENIENCE

Even in more established democratic societies like those of Western Europe and the United States, the desire of leaders to be as free as possible from what they regard as the glare of relentless public scrutiny is a commonplace. Thus, evading the media becomes a serious political game of sorts, and certainly one consideration in favoring covert over open diplomatic channels. Another is the natural craving of policy framers to curtail public debate and domestic criticism, invariably seen by them as unwarranted, excessive “interference” that is inimical to the national interest. Those opposed to concessions, or involved in matters of great delicacy or high risk, such as putting out feelers to an enemy or embarking on a major policy departure, tend to feel this way in particular.

However, Kissinger-like dissembling and diplomatic intrigue go deeper than that. Back channels do not reflect merely the policymaker’s penchant for privacy. Instead, backchanneling of late has become a most convenient tool in the hands of highly competitive “political diplomatists”—those civil servants, foreign ministry experts, and political appointees to policymaking posts who are directly engaged at home in foreign affairs.

Behind the back door is a calculated attempt at gaining policy primacy. Playing hegemonic or exclusionary politics aims at neutralizing one’s organizational rivals by, in effect, bypassing them. Kissinger’s memoirs reveal the extent of palace intrigues during the first Nixon presidency. On the one hand, he rails against the practice whereby key State Department cables were not shown to White House national security staffers for

clearance, and reports of talks the Department held with Arab leaders were supplied only after the event. Yet, on the other hand, he goes on to confess: “Equally, State did not know of our secret channel to Cairo,” adding, “I doubt that many textbooks on political science will commend these procedures.” The motive for these procedures—whether interdepartmental tit-for-tat politics or more valid considerations of strictest confidentiality—is unclear.¹⁸

Of all the artifices and instruments at a bureaucratic actor’s disposal, back-channel diplomacy in particular is extremely useful for making what in sports parlance are called “end-runs,” and in statecraft is the equivalent of military “flanking” and “outflanking” maneuvers.

EXCLUSIONARY POLITICS, ISRAELI STYLE

Again, in the Israeli case, what strikingly characterizes its handling of foreign affairs over the past decade is the mounting number and strength of competing—some would say overlapping and duplicating—government agencies. This proliferation both encourages every one of them to get in on the act and, conversely, justifies backchanneling as a desperate attempt by policy leaders at avoiding having to go through “proper channels” by effectively circumventing them. Among its other salutary effects, the back channel simply helps to cut the red tape.

¹⁸ Kissinger, p. 1295.

Foot-dragging, the interminable interdepartmental conferences and overstaffed working groups, the rigid standard operating procedures, the draining jurisdictional disputes and turf wars—these and other familiar hallmarks of bureaucratic policymaking are the bane of a decisionmaker’s existence. Thus viewed, back channels are to diplomacy what back rooms are to politics: a means for (a) shortcutting procedures and (b) cutting a deal. Opting for the back channel, in short, conveniently helps to escape diplomatic drudgery.

For this reason, backchanneling, usually dealt with solely as a diplomatic mode between states, actually reflects the frustrations of domestic “policy activists” and “peace processors,” those who would strive for the “grand bargain”—what Moshe Dayan aptly labeled “breakthroughs,” on the scale of the 1977 Sadat initiative—and yet find themselves repeatedly exasperated at having to work by the book and blocked by the tyranny of parliamentary watchdog committees and stifling formal procedures. Aside from everything else, the back channel offers an elegant way out—or better still, a way around—the conventions of politics as well as of diplomacy. Better yet, the diplomacy of surprise becomes entirely acceptable and warmly received, even after the fact, if (a) properly conducted externally, and (b) convincingly rationalized internally.

Agency proliferation in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv offers four models for sourcing secretive Israeli back-channel initiatives, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Models for Israeli Back-Channel Initiatives

Origin	Examples
Defense Ministry	1955-1956: Low-level contacts pursued by the defense establishment's Shimon Peres in Paris in successfully establishing a "French connection" without the full knowledge or participation of the Foreign Ministry in Jerusalem or Israel's ambassador in Paris
Foreign Ministry	<p>1987: Foreign Minister and Deputy Prime Minister Shimon Peres authorizing Ministry Director-General Avraham Tamir to meet with PLO Chairman Yassir Arafat in Mozambique</p> <p>1987: The Peres-Hussein London talks and agreement</p> <p>1988: Talks with the PLO in Paris led by Ephraim Sneh, with the O.K. given by both Peres and Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin (with or without Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir's knowledge)</p> <p>1993: The now-famous fourteen Israeli-Palestinian meetings conducted in Oslo leading to the breakthrough Declaration of Principles of 13 September</p>
Prime Minister's Office (PMO)	2000: The "Stockholm channel" authorized by Prime Minister Ehud Barak, deputizing Shlomo Ben-Ami, the minister for internal security, to conduct private negotiations with Palestinian Authority representatives independent of the formal Interim Agreement talks taking place between respective official delegations
PMO but with agencies having a "need to know" actually kept "in the know"	2000: The several parallel back channels personally orchestrated by Prime Minister Barak all at one time in seeking to pave the way for a permanent-status accord by the announced September deadline, and involving both trusted personnel from within his office as well as a select few other ministers, such as Ben-Ami and Justice Minister Yossi Beilin

DOMESTIC COSTS OF BACKCHANNELING

Many have applauded backchannel diplomacy's obvious and not inconsiderable virtues. As Secretary of State Madeleine Albright observes: "Discussions about negotiations are very much like mushrooms. They do much better when they are not in the light."¹⁹ Indeed, the necessity at certain times for discreet overtures, for probing an opponent's (or ally's) intentions, for preparatory discussions, is clear. So are the advantages, which include building trust and exchanging confidences; avoiding undue speculation or, worse, undue expectations; and relieving tough bargainers from having to adopt intransigent positions that henceforth remain part of the public record.

For Israel there have been definite pluses in activating backstage connections and contacts, not least the diplomatic successes that have stemmed from them. That much is apparent from the two most notable instances of back-channel breakthroughs. Had it not been for the intense backchanneling that helped unblock the way to subsequent negotiation and formal bargaining, neither the 1977 peace breakthrough with Egypt nor the long process of accommodation with the Palestinian national movement begun at Oslo in 1993 might have come about; certainly not at the times and in the ways they did.

Nevertheless, I would like to shift the focus from the proven advantages of backstage diplomacy to its attendant liabilities.

¹⁹ Madeleine Albright, quoted in the *International Herald Tribune*, 8 December 1999.

No matter how dramatic or how successful, backchanneling is never cost-free, and certainly not on the home front.

As derived from the Israeli experience, some seven potential hazards—originating domestically and having decidedly domestic as well as external consequences—represent the debit side of the ledger.

1. *Policy disarray.* Once revealed, the gambit of pursuing one or more prospective back channels in addition to the active, open ones inevitably projects the sense, at least initially, of policymaking confusion. For our purposes, whether these clandestine dealings are exposed prematurely or in an official announcement marking a new policy departure is actually quite immaterial. The impression is more or less the same: inconsistency at best, contradiction and cynical double-dealing at worst.

2. *Rogue operations.* Indeed, considering the mystery enshrouding backdoor efforts, no other area of public policy carries a greater attendant risk of governments losing control—or, in some ways no less damaging, simply giving the *impression* of losing control. There is the notion of an Israeli “foreign policy system”,²⁰ and there is the fact that no one may be fully in charge at all times. Confirming this is the related phenomenon—especially in an atmosphere or “culture” of secrecy—where too much hushed-up scurrying and backchanneling results in uncoordinated and even unauthorized initiatives, i.e., rogue operations. America has its Irangate; Israel’s list boasts the ill-conceived 1985 Jonathan

20 Of which Brecher is the foremost proponent; see *The Foreign Policy System of Israel*.

Pollard spy affair and the Khalid Mashal botch-up involving a Mossad attempt in late 1997 to eliminate a Hamas operative in violation of Jordanian sovereignty.

3. *Dissension in the ranks.* One notable domestic fallout from excessive and unorchestrated backchanneling intrigue is the confusion and mistrust it tends to generate. In particular, otherwise loyal team players working under entirely different terms of reference and instructions suddenly find themselves employed in a politics of deception. Not only had they been kept out of the loop but actually used as pawns, as decoys in a diplomatic ruse aimed at maintaining certain pretenses, whereas the real diplomatic “action” is found to have been taking place elsewhere, and—an even more egregious bureaucratic sin—conducted by others.

Suffice it to recall the sense of hurt on the part of Elyakim Rubinstein, Israel’s participant in the formal Washington talks with a joint Jordanian-Palestinian (non-PLO) representation, upon learning of the Oslo gambit in 1993.²¹ Or the umbrage taken by then-Chief of Staff Ehud Barak at not having been brought into closest confidence by Prime Minister Rabin, nor consulted for his professional military opinion on the security ramifications of the Oslo Declaration of Principles. Although in neither of these cases did this happen, there is certainly a danger that bruised egos will convert former decisionmaking loyalists into disgruntled, even alienated critics of the new back

21 One of the leading back-channel negotiators on the Israeli side admits that with respect to the Washington parallel talks “we were engaged in a charade”; Uri Savir, *The Process: 1,100 Days That Changed the Middle East* (New York: Random House, 1998), p. 5.

channel or the new policy departure who, rather than resign, continue to resist from within.

A further illustration is that of Yassir Abd Rabu. Chosen by Authority chairman Arafat to head the official Palestinian delegation in negotiations with Israel on final-status issues, he was reportedly deeply insulted and resentful at having been outflanked by the secret, parallel exploratory talks near Stockholm that Arafat authorized in early 2000.

4. *Credibility gaps.* There is no escaping the fact that backchanneling surprises—even the successful ones—almost inevitably sow widespread distrust and misunderstanding. Dealing with the enemy is a particularly sensitive matter; after all, such probes ordinarily stand in direct violation of existing statutes and treaties: for example, the American Cold War ban against dealing with Red China and formal treaty obligations to Taiwan; the pre-1993 standing legislation of the Knesset that forbade contacts with members of the proscribed PLO.

Thus civil servants and bureaucrats are not the only ones liable to feel victimized. Outside observers—antagonists, allies, and concerned onlookers alike—also claim to be profoundly affected by the mixed signals, complaining of trust violated and rules broken. To a large extent, this is a natural part of the readjustment process that usually follows the *fait accompli* of a new alignment or a new regional and international reality brought about in whole or in part through the previously unreported back channel.

Lest it be objected that this pertains to external rather than internal affairs, we should recall the close working relationships of a “clientele” nature that exist between foreign policy agencies

and foreign governments. In such instances personal reputation and departmental standing often rest on advocacy of a former, now repudiated policy course or of an abandoned bilateral relationship. Hence, vested bureaucratic interests are also indirectly transformed by shifting diplomatic orientations.

5. *Alienated allies.* This is a direct, negative offshoot of the problem of credibility gaps. That special cooperative relationships based on mutual confidences may be seriously affected is of particular importance for illustrating that back-channel initiatives, no matter how bold, dramatic, or constructive, can also be counterproductive, both in the shorter and longer term. There are, for example, the likely immediate feelings of disorientation and displacement bordering on betrayal that one's closest allies and partners will experience upon first learning of what had been going on behind their backs, possibly even for some time—what the Japanese referred to as “*shoku*” in the wake of the Nixon-Kissinger opening to China without any prior consultation, and without even a hint being given Tokyo in strictest confidence by way of preparing it for the official announcement.

Israeli cases of this diplomacy of surprise toward key allies occurred in 1977 and in 1993. In the former instance, the Sadat initiative caught the Carter administration completely off guard. Having staked its Middle East policy on convening a comprehensive peace conference cosponsored with Soviet Russia that would be modeled on the 1973 Geneva conference, President Carter found himself preempted by the backdoor initiative jointly orchestrated by Egypt and Israel. Initially disenchanted if not understandably infuriated, to their credit the

president and his advisers swallowed American pride, endorsed the Jerusalem process, repaired confidences with Tel Aviv, and eventually returned to the key role of “honest broker” at Camp David.

Considering that the only other possible interpretation is gross insensitivity, no less instructive is the calculated risk Ministers Rabin and Peres must have taken in September 1993 in forsaking Israel’s erstwhile and longstanding Arab partner, King Hussein. What Oslo in effect represents, among other things, is Israel’s unilateral abrogation of its traditional “Jordanian option,” together with the previously unthinkable act of replacing it with a “Palestinian option.” Since the implausibility of any direct Israeli-Palestinian discourse had been the main pillar of Hussein’s strategy of cooperating with Israel in a functional “tacit security regime,”²² the Hashemite monarch understandably felt a sense of betrayal. To his credit, rather than panicking in the face of crumbling policy premises or breaking off contacts with his Israeli counterparts in a fit of pique, the king quickly accommodated himself to the new realities. Within weeks he renewed his own private back-channel dialogue with Rabin and Peres, and in the end skillfully managed to safeguard Jordan’s bedrock interests with the 1994 Israel-Jordan peace treaty.

6. *Fiascoes*. Surely the single greatest danger in plying the

22 The notion of functional collaboration even among adversaries in a formal state of belligerency is developed in Aharon Klieman, “The Israel-Jordan Tacit Security Regime,” in Efraim Inbar (ed.), *Regional Security Regimes* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), pp. 127-149. The implications of the Oslo turnabout for Israel’s Jordanian partnership are discussed in Aharon Klieman, “Israel’s ‘Jordanian Option’: A Post-Oslo Reassessment,” in Ilan Peleg (ed.), *The Middle East Peace Process* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), pp. 179-195.

back roads of diplomacy is that of major foreign policy fiascoes. Israeli backchanneling has certainly known its share of diplomatic setbacks and embarrassments stemming from unconsummated private initiatives, from premature exposure, from incensed third-party observers (including within one's own policy establishment) whose own core interests are threatened by the covert diplomatic activity. The 1954 Lavon affair, involving sabotage activities against Egypt at the same time back-channel contacts were being explored, offers an early example of Defense Ministry and Foreign Ministry personnel working at cross-purposes. In 1995, Warren Christopher was sent into the deep back channel in an effort at brokering an agreement between President Hafiz al-Assad and Rabin on the terms for an Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights in return for a Syrian peace and normalization of relations. Rather than producing the sought-after breakthrough formula, even five years later there was Israeli-Syrian-American misunderstanding over precisely what had and had not been pledged at the time. Similarly, the private "Ronald Lauder mission," undertaken during 1997 by a well-connected American Jewish businessman acting as a discreet emissary at the behest of Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, ended up being an almost identical repeat of contentious and ultimately unproductive Jerusalem-Damascus backchanneling.

7. *Duplicity*. Last and not least are the cumulative costs, at home, of political alienation deriving from either excessive or dysfunctional backchanneling. For there is no way of getting around the fact that back-channel statecraft involves a strong element of deception; and that deception, no matter how

warranted for the sake of expediency and in the name of peaceful relations, nevertheless remains deception.

One of backchanneling's supreme ironies is that it is invariably used against one's own side and one's very own compatriots. Those parties most kept in the dark are usually to be found, first and foremost, in certain targeted sectors of a backchanneler's own domestic constituency, such as: the media, policy critics, parliamentarians and legislative watchdog committees, political opponents, and even the permanent policymaking establishment charged with handling ongoing, routine affairs and administering foreign relations.

All in all, unless effective precautions are taken against such risks, these internal and external hazards will be enough to give backchanneling a bad reputation.

BACK-CHANNEL BEDFELLOWS

So powerful are the incentives for minimizing domestic interference and for abbreviating the decisional process, with its emphasis on formal channels, that I am tempted to characterize backchanneling as a fascinating exercise in complicity. From this viewpoint, back-channel *diplomacy* provides an avenue for ostensible rivals (Rabin and Arafat, Netanyahu and Arafat, Barak and Arafat) to knowingly engage in *political* collusion with each other.

Seen in this light, in the event a particular exploratory back channel should show real potential, progressing into shared confidences and mutual objectives, at that point collaboration

between “the best of enemies”²³ assumes even greater appeal. Thereafter, late stages of backchanneling will very likely proceed with the express purpose of at best deceiving and at worst lulling one’s own public, until in effect it becomes too late politically and domestically to mount any meaningful resistance.

Neutralizing political opponents, especially those set against any bold diplomatic departures, by means of misrepresentation, ambiguity, secrecy, and denial, and through a policy of *faits accomplis*, may very well be totally defensible. But that is not the point. The avoidance of having to share confidences or of the constitutional need for accountability, no matter how warranted in foreign policy terms, tends over time to breed public cynicism toward leadership, principled policy, candor, and the like. In democracies, to fail to take the public into greater confidence and prepare it in advance for a fundamental policy departure is to risk the emergence of significant resistance at home, including conservative bureaucratic opponents of change, in general or on a specific policy.

For instance, the Oslo back channel’s opening to Palestinian nationalism was a brilliant tactical move by the Israeli government. By catching the Jewish settler movement and the opposition Likud Party completely off guard, Rabin, Peres, and Beilin, Oslo’s principal architects, managed to assure that the Washington signing ceremony would become a Middle East reality. Yet Oslo was merely the beginning of a multiphased peace process, not its culmination. Almost immediately, strong,

23 The term is borrowed from the title of a book by Uri Bar-Joseph, *The Best of Enemies: Israel and Transjordan in the War of 1948* (London: Frank Cass, 1987).

vocal resistance formed inside Israel to the entire Oslo back-channel strategy. Rabin's assassination in 1995 by a right-wing fanatic serves as merely one, albeit the most appalling, manifestation of this deep-seated resentment in many circles at having been deceived and excluded from the policy debate. By the same token, the often-secretive procedures by which the initial diplomatic coup, the "Gaza-Jericho" sequel to Oslo, and subsequent interim accords were engineered led to the coalescence of a potential blocking coalition against further, incremental territorial concessions in the West Bank, Gaza, and Jerusalem.

In much the same way, Palestinians outraged at Arafat's high-handed concessions to Israel eventually recovered from the first shock of Oslo and organized after 1993 into two resistance fronts. One, to the left on the political spectrum, was made up of outspoken critics such as Palestinian spokeswoman Hanan Ashrawi, Columbia University professor Edward Said, and deposed PLO "foreign minister" Farouk Kaddumi. The other, on the political and religious right, was led by the Islamic fundamentalists of Hamas.

One important lesson about the domestic political dynamics surrounding international backchanneling derives from the decline in enthusiasm since 1993, and Oslo's attendant loss of momentum as the real wages of peace began to dawn on the respective Israeli and Palestinian sides. The lesson: back channels can only go so far. No matter how skillfully fine-tuned, they do not always deliver the sweeping popular support that even the most courageous leader must have in order to consummate the bold diplomatic triumph. Whereas the American public was ripe for rapprochement with Red China in

1972, in the case of Israeli and Palestinian societies it seems that one, possibly both, may not have been nearly as far advanced on the path of reconciliation.

All of this suggests that back channels are invaluable as diplomatic openers, but less so for successful diplomatic endgames. Or, alternatively, that only a new backup back channel à la Stockholm 2000, summitry à la Camp David, or a combination thereof can salvage the gains initially derived from backchanneling.

THE 1987 LONDON DOCUMENT

The Oslo back channel is certainly rich with significant lessons, one of them being the high unpredictability regarding the final outcome of back-channel probes. For all its later publicity the “Norwegian connection” developed from extremely modest beginnings, representing at the outset only one of a number of low-level lines of contact that were then active. No one could have predicted that of all the channels being explored, this would be the one to yield the sought-after breakthrough.²⁴

²⁴ The sources on Oslo are quite extensive by now, starting with the first book to come off the presses: Mark Perry, *A Fire in Zion: The Israeli-Palestinian Search for Peace* (New York: William Morrow, 1994). Although short on analytical or theoretical insights, the bookshelf does offer elaborate and rich descriptive material, including on how the Norwegian back channel functioned and what precautions were taken to keep the discussions confidential. Recommended are: Perry, *Fire in Zion*; Eytan Bentsur, *Haderekh L'shalom Ohver B'Madrid* [The Road to Peace Crosses Madrid] (Tel Aviv: Yediot Acharonot, 1997). Personalized accounts from two Israeli and Palestinian direct participants are, respectively: Savir, *The Process*; Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen), *Through Secret Channels* (Reading, U.K.: Garnet, 1995). By far the best systematic treatment is that of David Makovsky, *Making Peace with the PLO* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996).

Similarly important for the general practice of backchanneling is Oslo's confirmation of what Pruitt calls "communication chains," whereby the objective of utmost secrecy is facilitated "by communicating through chains of intermediaries" meant to provide political cover and deniability.²⁵ In the case of Oslo, such a chain featured no less than seven participants, or links: PLO leader Arafat ↔ Abu Ala (the PLO delegation) ↔ Norwegian officials ↔ Israeli academics ↔ Israeli diplomats ↔ Foreign Minister Peres ↔ Prime Minister Rabin.

Nevertheless, it seems to me that even Oslo must share first place with the draft agreement of 11 April 1987. Although (a) far less known in the annals of Israeli backchanneling and in the last analysis also (b) abortive, the London channel pursued by Foreign Minister Peres and King Hussein is surely as important as the Norwegian channel in terms of explanatory power and great illustrative value. Thus, from the standpoint of "communication chains," and by way of introducing the key players, this so-called London back channel also involved an exceptional number of separate links. These were: King Hussein ↔ Peres ↔ U.S. envoy Richard Murphy ↔ the Israeli Foreign Ministry's Yossi Beilin (who, like Peres, reappears prominently in the subsequent Oslo chain) ↔ Secretary of State George Shultz ↔ Prime Minister Shamir.

Pieced together from fragmentary evidence and admittedly subjective firsthand accounts from at least five out of the six

25 See Dean G. Pruitt, "The Tactics of Third-Party Intervention," *Orbis* 44, 2 (Spring 2000), in which he develops the idea of "communication chains" in making backchanneling possible, and also secret (p. 253).

“principals,”²⁶ the London accord mirrors each of the seven cautionary features outlined above—policy disarray and partisan “rogue operations,” bureaucratic dissension, damaged credibility, alienated allies, fiascoes, and elements of duplicity—all of which combined to produce a serious foreign policy debacle.²⁷

Farce or fiasco, the London channel’s ultimate outcome stemmed, I would argue, from the internal political hazards of backchanneling rather than from the bargaining process or the dynamics of adversarial negotiation. In short, the London episode combined good diplomacy with bad politics.

Briefly, the background to the London channel primarily involved the Middle East diplomatic impasse five years after the 1982 Lebanon War and the shelved Reagan Plan initiative, the framework for any Israeli-Jordanian peace settlement. Another factor was the strong resolve of Shimon Peres upon completing two years as prime minister under the rotational National Unity Government, with arch-rival Shamir as foreign minister. Picking up the narrative at that point, Peres chronicles: “Shamir and I duly changed places on the appointed day, but becoming foreign minister in no way weakened my urgent sense that the Jordanian opening must continue to be pursued with vigor and

26 Yitzhak Shamir, *Sikumo Shel Davar* [Summing Up] (Tel Aviv: Eydanim, 1994); Shimon Peres, *Battling for Peace: A Memoir* (New York: Random House, 1995); Yossi Beilin, in a series of interviews with Shayke Ben-Porat, *Sichot im Yossi Beilin* [Talks with Yossi Beilin] (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1996); George Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph: My Years as Secretary of State* (New York: Scribner’s, 1993); “His Royal Shyness: King Hussein and Israel,” an interview conducted with King Hussein by Avi Shlaim on 3 December 1996, but only published, by agreement, following the king’s death on 7 February 1999, in the *New York Review of Books*, 15 July 1999.

27 At least two participants, Hussein and Peres, believed emphatically that had the London protocol been implemented the Intifada, which broke out shortly thereafter in December, would have been averted—yet also, by inference, the Oslo opening!

determination.”²⁸ He goes on, revealingly: “As the long, frustrating months of diplomacy grew into years, I decided to cut through the complicated and necessarily slow-moving machinery of shuttle diplomacy and try to reach a breakthrough by means of a secret summit.”²⁹

Matters progressed, and the decisive meeting between Peres and Hussein occurred in central London on 11 April. Facilitated through a prominent London attorney and confidant of the king’s, Victor Mishcon, the need for utmost secrecy led Peres to fly aboard a small executive jet “decked out in a stylish brown wig and wearing my most elegant suit, as befits a royal audience.”³⁰ At the end of the day the two men achieved complete understanding on a joint strategy for breaking “new ground”³¹ on the Middle East conflict. Their initialed agreement called for a comprehensive solution to the Palestine problem by fulfilling the rights of the Palestinian people under Jordan’s aegis, and by convening an international conference with the participation of a joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation, again under Jordanian dominance.

Upon taking leave of each other, Peres pledged to undertake two assignments critical to the plan’s success: first, briefing the U.S. administration and gaining consent for tabling the solution as an American proposal; second, reporting the breakthrough accord to Prime Minister Shamir and gaining the Israeli government’s approval. Accordingly, by his own admission

28 Peres, p. 264.

29 Ibid., p. 265.

30 Ibid., p. 265.

31 The components of the London accord were actually very familiar proposals reminiscent of the 1982 Reagan initiative, which in turn borrowed heavily from the Israeli Labor Party’s ideas, but put together in a seemingly attractive new package.

Beilin, then director-general of the Foreign Ministry, was immediately sent by Peres to Helsinki to brief, but more importantly to enlist Secretary of State Shultz without either government approval or Shamir's cognizance.³²

According to Peres's own version,

I called Prime Minister Shamir as soon as I got home, early on Sunday morning. We agreed to meet alone, after the weekly cabinet session. I gave Shamir a full account of my talks with the king and read him the texts of the two drafts. He asked me to read them again, and I did so. But when he asked me to leave the papers with him, I refused. I told him frankly that I was afraid of leaks, not by him—he was always discreet—but by members of his staff. Anyway, I added, the idea was for the Americans to put these agreements forward as their proposal; it would be better, therefore, if he received them from the Americans. Shamir said nothing.³³

As later recalled by Shamir, “Peres came to my office and read the text, but refused to give me a copy for further careful study. Possibly because he didn't deem the Prime Minister of Israel entitled. So that I had no choice but to wait several days until the United States ambassador supplied me with the requested text.”³⁴

32 Ben-Porat, p. 92.

33 Peres, p. 268.

34 Shamir, p. 208. See also Avi Shlaim, *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World* (New York: Norton, 2000), pp. 443-448. Although Shlaim relies heavily on Peres's version, he notes in addition that Shamir and his colleagues suspected Peres may have made further secret concessions to Hussein, either verbally or in a secret annex to the London agreement (p. 446).

Shamir may have held his peace and not said anything at their highly charged and confrontational meeting, but he definitely set about to countermand Peres's private initiative. Playing tit-for-tat, Shamir promptly dispatched his close confidant Moshe Arens to Washington—without the foreign minister's approval³⁵—in order to dissuade Shultz from interfering in Israeli domestic affairs. In his memoirs Shultz offers his recollection of the 24 April meeting in which "Arens stressed the impropriety of what Peres had done."³⁶ Quite clearly the American secretary of state bought this argument, for he later wrote: "the foreign minister of Israel's government of national disunity was asking me to sell to Israel's prime minister, the head of a rival party, the substance of an agreement made with a foreign head of state."³⁷ Faced with a schizophrenic Israeli diplomacy, hesitant to interfere in a domestic jurisdictional dispute, and known for his decency and propriety, Shultz decided in the end against sponsoring the draft proposals. More important, without Shamir's endorsement the London back-channel accord remained an inoperative piece of paper. In December the Palestinian Intifada erupted, spreading across the Gaza Strip and the West Bank; and on 31 July 1988, Hussein unilaterally renounced all claims to the disputed territories.

35 Barely concealing his ire even years later, Peres writes: "Circumventing his foreign minister (me), Shamir sent Minister without Portfolio Moshe Arens to Washington to meet Shultz ... I was told nothing of his mission to Shultz" (p. 269). What he conveniently neglects to mention is his having dispatched Beilin to Shultz just a few days earlier without prior clearance.

36 Shultz, p. 941.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 939. Summarizing, he adds for effect: "Peres was informing me, and wanting me to collaborate with him, before going to the prime minister."

One can attribute the outcome of the London back-channel initiative to any number of causal factors, including: the unnatural and impossible power-sharing arrangement of the National Unity Government imposed by the 1984 election results; the deep Labor-Likud ideological gap over territorial compromise and in assessments of Arab readiness to accept Israel fully; poor chemistry between Peres and Shamir, marked by mutual disrespect and distrust; Peres's own working style; his fervor and supreme confidence in the wisdom of his designated policy course; Hussein's noted hypercaution; Shultz's circumspection in not wanting to become entangled in Israeli politics and policymaking. To be sure, each component played a part in the debacle.

In their otherwise excellent review of the London episode, Eisenberg and Caplan present the 1987 Hussein-Peres back-channel agreement as a case of "Premature Peacemaking" and conclude that it "fell victim to several traditionally flawed conditions of Arab-Israeli negotiation."³⁸ In other words, they assign the failure to exogenous diplomatic causes. In the end, however, the London back channel failed primarily because of Peres's deliberate procedural and political "end run." By any standard of good government and proper operating procedure it was Peres who was directly accountable to Shamir, and not vice versa; yet Peres's zeal for the London back channel to King Hussein apparently led him to circumvent proper channels at home. Hence his bald outflanking maneuver in and of itself

38 Laura Zittrain Eisenberg and Neil Caplan, *Negotiating Arab-Israeli Peace* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998). Ch. 3 (pp. 60-74) deals extensively with the London initiative. The quotation is from p. 60.

guaranteed opposition from Shamir, who, whatever else, remained, constitutionally, Israel's prime minister, with ultimate responsibility for national policy at that particular moment.

One interesting discrepancy in the respective Shamir and Peres narratives on London backchanneling may shed some further light on the question of who was or was not "in the know" in 1987. In his version of the events Peres claims to have been accompanied to the London meeting by two men, Beilin and "a senior representative of the prime minister's office,"³⁹ seemingly exonerating him on the principal charge of violating the most basic rule of ministerial and cabinet conduct. The presence of the "senior representative" could only mean that the prime minister was duly informed of what was taking place, even if not by Peres himself.

Yet we have it from an informed student of Israeli-Jordanian secret contacts that the "special representative" to whom Peres refers was Mossad official Ephraim Halevi (later Israel's ambassador to Jordan and director of the Mossad), who was there solely to handle security and logistical matters. As such, Halevi was not physically present at the actual meetings and therefore was in no position to report back to Shamir on what transpired in them.⁴⁰

The point is not unimportant. In the final analysis, the 1987 London agreement constitutes an extraordinary Foreign Ministry "end run" almost without parallel in diplomatic annals. Serious improprieties took place, as in the effort at mobilizing a

39 Peres, p. 265.

40 Moshe Zak, *Hussein Oseh Shalom* [Hussein Makes Peace] (Ramat Gan, Israel: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1996), p. 274.

foreign power, the United States, to coerce one's own leader. Simply put, Peres proceeded to conduct his office as though the rotation had never taken place and the rules of the 1984 National Unity Government did not mandate genuine power sharing.

It boils down to the fact that in orchestrating “my milestone agreement”⁴¹ a foreign minister did not concert his backdoor effort with his prime minister. Despite diminished official status, Peres operated in defiance of the prime minister of Israel. On this point there is a surprising consensus, especially on the part of the other direct actors. Thus, King Hussein gave vent to his exasperation, confiding to a later interviewer: “as far as I was concerned, Peres was the Israeli interlocutor. I talked with him. I agreed with him on something and he couldn't deliver.”⁴² Similarly, Shultz remembers “fiery charges” flying back and forth between Peres and Shamir, but concludes that there was no getting around the “impropriety.”⁴³

Had Peres elected to relate differently and behave differently toward Shamir, confiding in him and consulting him all along the way, would the outcome have been qualitatively different? I, for one, strongly believe not, if only because of Shamir's conservative approach and known resistance to far-reaching concessions. Yet, on the other hand, power configurations inside Israel left Peres as foreign minister with no choice but to deal with his own immediate superior, whether directly or indirectly; either after-the-fact or at the outset of the

41 Peres, p. 270.

42 Shlaim, “His Royal Shyness.”

43 Shultz, p. 942.

renewed London back channel. By presenting Shamir with no choice, Peres opted in effect for head-on confrontation—and lost.

The London episode is therefore not without elements of hubris. No matter the noble intentions in seeking to liberate Israel and Israeli foreign relations from the stranglehold of a protracted, existential conflict. The case of the 1987 back channel displays overweening self-confidence bordering on insubordination. Such qualities are likely to prove as fatal in diplomacy and back-channel diplomacy as in domestic political affairs.

Interestingly, we know that six years later in the Norwegian back channel, the interpersonal chemistry between Peres, again serving as foreign minister, and Prime Minister Rabin was not that much better than had existed between Peres and Shamir. Yet this time Peres behaved in a markedly different manner, winning Rabin over to the Oslo formula—and with markedly different results. Consummate diplomatic skills are one thing; consummate political skills, another.

The Dayan-Touhami prelude to Sadat's 1977 visit aside, London 1987 and Oslo 1993 stand out, in retrospect, as the two single most instructive instances of known backchanneling involving Israel. They also happen to complement each other in that the former represents a miscarriage of backchanneling whereas the latter is the paradigm of a successful case. And there is another linkage: ironically, had the London channel actually eventuated, as planned, in a bilateral Israeli-Jordanian peace treaty, the Oslo conduit for a direct Israeli-Palestinian rapprochement would never have come into play.

BACKCHANNELING: A BALANCE SHEET

As presented here, it is dualism that stands out as the central theme of backchanneling. Friedman's "half-secret, half-public twilight diplomacy" represents the uneasy compromise between regular and irregular, open and clandestine statecraft. Similarly, it serves an external but also a domestic function. So too, lastly, does it bear risks, exact a price, and demand trade-offs.

Berridge has been one of the few to portray backchanneling as multidimensional: political and diplomatic; external and internal; offering both pluses and minuses. In his view, "the advantages of back channels are secrecy, speed, and the avoidance of internal bureaucratic battles," whereas their disadvantages include "the possibility of overlooking key points, their deleterious effects on morale, and the related difficulty of getting those who have been excluded from the decision-making to support the implementation of any agreement which they have not helped to generate."⁴⁴

Continuing in this vein, in its strictly diplomatic guise the back door is part of exploring, probing, initiating, and as such, offers a number of distinct advantages and opportunities: for breaking deadlocks, enhancing flexibility, passing messages, exploring new formulas, testing each other's sincerity. As a conduit, though, backchanneling's ability to offer protection and immunity is offset by its being subject to some of the interstate distortions and misinterpretations discussed above.

⁴⁴ G. R. Berridge, *Diplomacy: Theory and Practice* (London: Prentice-Hall, 1995), p. 159.

Moreover, on the domestic plane as well, backchanneling, like secrecy in general, may on the one hand work to limit domestic influence (i.e., interference) and perhaps avoid arousing public anxiety in the course of delicate negotiations; yet on the other hand it has its own problems and drawbacks. As noted by Aggestam in her study of two-track diplomacy, rumored activity behind the backs of directly concerned or interested parties at home may suffice to arouse suspicion, and is certainly, along with its practitioners, susceptible to criticism on grounds of proper democratic procedure. It can therefore result in faulty decisionmaking by ignoring experts and expert opinion, just as it is likely to foster unnecessary opposition in those quarters excluded from the process.⁴⁵

IS THERE A FUTURE FOR BACKCHANNELING?

In concluding, I shall emphasize five points.

First, back-channel diplomacy is a neglected sphere of contemporary international relations and of tacit, quiet, pragmatic statecraft. Yet it is vitally pertinent to internal politics and to the foreign policy decisionmaking process always taking place in some form or other within each international actor, state or nonstate. Alongside the interparty and procedural bargaining aspects of backchanneling, there is a growing need for investigating (a) the domestic origins, and (b) the legal and

45 Karin Aggestam, "Two-Track Diplomacy: Negotiations between Israel and the PLO through Open and Secret Channels," Davis Papers on Israel's Foreign Policy No. 53, Leonard Davis Institute, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, esp. pp. 10-11.

political implications of diplomatic backchanneling. Not in the last analysis, but rather in the first analysis, this form of statecraft needs to be treated as a highly political process transpiring outside the negotiating room as well as a higher form of diplomatic negotiating process.

Second, toward that end a useful research agenda should involve probing more deeply into the range of motivating forces and political calculations for back-channel initiatives. Once the investigation goes beyond the domestic foundations to the external, diplomatic mechanics of backchanneling, we need to differentiate between three separate facets: (a) *back channels*, the venues in which these meetings and discussions might best take place; (b) *backchanneling*, the procedures, as well as the ploys and artifices, by means of which the dialogue can begin, be facilitated and, hopefully, successfully completed; and (c) *backchannelists*, i.e., the principals, their qualifications, diplomatic approach, and style of conducting negotiations. Only then will a heightened appreciation of internal-external linkages equip us, for example, to incorporate a backchannelist's political status at home among the reasons for his or her selection as an emissary—not excluding, as a form of co-optation, possibly even the choice of a critic or opponent to represent the government and country on so important a mission.

Third, with respect to the domestic sphere, national leaders are duly cautioned to resist the temptation to abuse the back-channel option, or to use it unduly. This pertains especially to pursuing back channels for some of the wrong reasons, or more to promote hidden domestic and partisan political agendas than for the sake of genuine reasons of state.

When all is said and done, diplomatic back channels do constitute a form of deception, and as such are subject to George Kennan's apt warning: "We easily become, ourselves, the sufferers from these methods of deception."⁴⁶

Fourth, the known Israeli experience with backchanneling readily confirms Abba Eban's insight that Israel has served—and continues to serve—as the "great laboratory in which the diplomatic processes of this generation have been enacted."⁴⁷

Finally, as of midyear 2000 twenty-six countries still refrained from conducting official front-channel relations with the Jewish state. Even following full normalization, we can confidently conclude that, based on (a) contemporary trends in international relations as well as (b) the competitive nature of policymaking in Jerusalem, in Israel's case the quiet back channel has a future.

46 George F. Kennan, "Suffering from Deception: Secrecy's High Cost," *International Herald Tribune*, 20 May 1997.

47 Abba Eban, "Interest and Conscience in Diplomacy," *Society* 3, 3 (1986): 20.

