Prior to the signing of the second Egyptian-Israeli disengagement agreement in September 1975, Washington was interested in broadening the scope of Egyptian-Israeli negotiations to be more than a series of interim military agreements. To do so, the State Department focused increasingly on ways to make future agreements comprehensive; this entailed focusing on the Palestinian dimension of the conflict. On November 12, 1975, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Harold Saunders appeared before the House Sub-Committee on Near Eastern Affairs and stated that “the legitimate interests of the Palestinian Arabs must be taken into account in the negotiating of an Arab-Israeli peace.” Almost immediately, the PLO formally registered with the Justice Department, the first step toward opening an office in Washington. Then, the prestigious Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C., issued “Toward Peace in the Middle East”, a blueprint for an Arab-Israeli settlement. The proximity of the timing of Saunders testimony (sanctioned by then Secretary of State Kissinger) and that of the issuance of the Brookings Report was not coincidental. Three core concepts that shaped future Arab-Israeli negotiations emerged from both the State Department’s remarks and Toward Peace in the Middle East: a specific political role for the Palestinians, the concept of trading land for peace, and a comprehensive approach to resolve the conflict between Israel and all of its neighbors.

“Toward Peace in the Middle East” was drafted by a dozen professors and former Washington bureaucrats. Among them were Zbigniew Brzezinski and William Quandt, both of whom would hold key foreign policy positions in the Carter White House. Brzezinski became Carter’s National Security Council Adviser, and Quandt head of the Middle East Desk at the National Security Council. Both of them played key roles in shaping Carter’s outlook and policies on Middle Eastern issues. How influential was the writing and issuance of the Brookings Paper “Toward Peace in the Middle East”? Brzezinski emphatically said that “it shaped my view; I shaped it, [I was] the one who pushed for a particularly broad strategy approach; ...[Secretary of State ]Vance was certainly very much in agreement with it. Carter read it and was quite influence by it.”

“Toward Peace in the Middle East” called for peace agreements between the parties, “extensive Palestinian political autonomy or a Palestinian entity federated with Jordan,” resettlement of the Palestinian refugees, an Israeli withdrawal to almost the June 5, 1967, borders, stages for implementing agreements, provision of UN guarantees, and constructive Soviet involvement in the negotiations. The method for achieving these diplomatic outcomes would be determined through a general conference or informal multilateral meetings. The report, issued by a prestigious Washington think tank and informally associated with the Democratic Party when it was out of office, called for resolving the Palestinian dimension of the conflict. It also called for a return to 1967 borders, which the government of Yitzhak Rabin in Israel found unacceptable. Moreover, the Israeli government reacted negatively to the Report because it was a plan posited by outsiders and not negotiated between the parties. Israel did not want a solution to its relations with Arab neighbors that was externally defined – then or in the future. The Israeli fear was that an imposed solution would jeopardize their government’s prerogative to decide what was in its best national and strategic interest. When the report was
issued, Egyptian President Sadat was pleased by the tensions it caused in US-Israeli relations. Ultimately the Carter administration used “Toward Peace in the Middle East” as its outline for seeking Arab-Israeli negotiations. Because Brzezinski played such an instrumental role in its writing and subsequently served Carter as his National Security Council Adviser, Israeli governments had reason to mistrust Brzezinski. When Carter spoke openly about the need for a “Palestinian homeland” in March 1977, Israeli officials perceived the Carter administration as at best “lacking warmth,” and at worst “hostile” to Israeli interests in its perception of both the appropriate content and methods of future negotiations. As it turned out, within three years of the publication of “Toward Peace in the Middle East”, Sadat’s overtures to the Israelis buried the comprehensive approach and the focus on the Palestinian dimension of the conflict – and not all the land taken in the 1967 war had to be exchanged for peace, only Sinai.

-Ken Stein, January 2012

The study group reached five main conclusions.

1. U.S. interests. The United States has a strong moral, political, and economic interest in a stable peace in the Middle East. It is concerned for the security, independence, and well-being of Israel and the Arab states of the area and for the friendship of both. Renewed hostilities would have far-reaching and perilous consequences which would threaten those interests.

2. Urgency. Whatever the merits of the interim agreement on Sinai, it still leaves the basic elements of the Arab-Israeli dispute substantially untouched. Unless these elements are soon addressed, rising tensions in the area will generate increased risk of violence. We believe that the best way to address these issues is by the pursuit of a comprehensive settlement.

3. Process. We believe that the time has come to begin the process of negotiating such a settlement among the parties, either at a general conference or at more informal multilateral meetings. While no useful interim step toward settlement should be overlooked or ignored, none seems promising at the present time and most have inherent disadvantages.

4. Settlement. A fair and enduring settlement should contain at least these elements as an integrated package:

   a. Security. All parties to the settlement commit themselves to respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the others and to refrain from the threat or use of force against them.

   b. Stages. Withdrawal to agreed boundaries and the establishment of peaceful relations carried out in stages over a period of years, each stage being undertaken only when the agreed provisions of the previous stage have been faithfully implemented.

   c. Peaceful relations. The Arab parties undertake not only to end such hostile actions against Israel as armed incursions, blockades, boycotts, and propaganda attacks, but
also to give evidence of progress toward the development of normal international and regional political and economic relations.

d. Boundaries. Israel undertakes to withdraw by agreed stages to the 5 June 1967 lines with only such modifications as are mutually accepted. Boundaries will probably need to be safeguarded by demilitarized zones supervised by UN forces.

e. Palestine. There should be provision for Palestinian self-determination, subject to Palestinian acceptance of the sovereignty and integrity of Israel within agreed boundaries. This might take the form either of an independent Palestine state accepting the obligations and commitments of the peace agreements or of a Palestine entity voluntarily federated with Jordan but exercising extensive political autonomy.

f. Jerusalem. The report suggests no specific solution for the particularly difficult problem of Jerusalem but recommends that, whatever the solution may be, it meet as a minimum the following criteria:

1. There should be unimpeded access to all of the holy places and each should be under the custodianship of its own faith;
2. There should be no barriers dividing the city which would prevent free circulation throughout it; and
3. Each national group within the city should, if it so desires, have substantial political autonomy within the area where it predominates.

Figure 2 The Brookings Report may have been influential in shaping the attitudes of the Carter Administration towards the Palestinian refugee issue. (Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, no known restrictions).
g. Guarantees. It would be desirable that the UN Security Council endorse the peace agreements and take whatever other actions to support them the agreements provide. In addition, there may well be need for unilateral or multilateral guarantees to some or all of the parties, substantial economic aid, and military assistance pending the adoption of agreed arms control measures.

5. U.S. role. The governments directly concerned bear the responsibility of negotiation and agreement, but they are unlikely to be able to reach agreement alone. Initiative, impetus, and inducement may well have to come from outside. The United States, because it enjoys a measure of confidence of parties on both sides and has the means to assist them economically and militarily, remains the great power best fitted to work actively with them in bringing about a settlement. Over and above helping to provide a framework for negotiation and submitting concrete proposals from time to time, the United States must be prepared to take other constructive steps, such as offering aid and providing guarantees where desired and needed. In all of this, the United States should work with the U.S.S.R. to the degree that Soviet willingness to play a constructive role will permit.

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1 Kenneth W Stein interview with Zbigniew Brzezinski, October 30, 1992, Washington, D.C.