One of the most astute visitors to the United States, Alexis de Tocqueville, observed that Americans had no threatening neighbors, were preoccupied with their own practical domestic affairs and were relatively uninterested in foreign affairs. What he said a century and a half ago still rings true today.

But we will ultimately suffer if Americans ignore the need for a decisive and coherent foreign policy. Witness the Americans still hostage in Lebanon, the victims of an irresolute and incoherent Reagan foreign policy in the Middle East.

What is needed is a United States Mideast policy for Americans -- not a policy formed in the interests of the Central American contras, no matter how "neat" that may seem to the Iran-Contra conspirators, nor in the interests of pariah regimes or "special friends" in the Middle East. Let us take a case in point.

One of the most intractable problems in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the question of the status of Jerusalem. It became clear in the early Twenties that the British had made impossibly contradictory promises regarding Zionist hopes vs. Palestinian lives in Palestine. Within this diplomatic morass, Jerusalem has been especially problematic.

A key feature of this problem is the centrality of Jerusalem to the three religions of the Book: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Witness the current strife between Israeli settlers and the Greek Orthodox Patriarch over Jewish squatters in a building in the Christian Quarter.

One of the principles of productive negotiating is leaving the most difficult issues until the end of the negotiation process. Then some easier points will have been resolved, the parties will feel more comfortable with one another, etc. Hence, all scenarios for negotiation between Palestinians and Israelis have proposed postponing the question of the status of Jerusalem until late in the process.

Now it is recognized on all responsible sides -- Israeli, Palestinian, the rest of the world -- that negotiations will occur between Israel and the PLO. The question is, when? In light of this realization, the Israeli government has been settling increasing numbers of Jews in East Jerusalem -- that is in the Palestinian West Bank. It hopes thereby to preempt a crucial step in the negotiating process.

It has been estimated that Israel has already settled more than 100,000 Jews in East Jerusalem -- in Gilo, French Hill, etc. There are plenty of options for settling recent immigrants within the 'Green Line' of Israel proper -- the estimated potential housing in Tel Aviv alone is well over a half-million inhabitants.

United States policy regarding these preemptive steps by Israel has not been decisive. In March 1980, the United States supported U.N. Security Council Resolution 465. This declared Israeli
settlements in East Jerusalem to be illegal under international law, since that was militarily
occupied territory. A few days later, President Carter, under considerable pressure at home from
the Zionist lobby as well as from Israel, retracted that U.S. support for Resolution 465.

In March, President Bush indicated that Israel should make no further settlements in East
Jerusalem. Again under substantial pressure, Congress then passed a resolution declaring that
(all) Jerusalem has been and always would be Israel's capital. This past week, Sen. Robert Dole,
who had voted for the resolution, changed his mind. He now realizes that the Congressional
action might harm the peace process.

Set the merits of the case aside for a moment. Overlook the national rights of the Palestinians,
the issues of international law, the threat to the possibility of peace in the Middle East, etc. Is it
not clear -- from the very policy vacillations themselves -- that there are enormous pressures and
counter-pressures on U.S. foreign policymakers on the issue of the future of Jerusalem? Given
these conflicting pressures, the best policy for promoting negotiations -- which are in American
interests -- may be maintaining the status quo. And the status quo does not permit further Israeli
settlements in East Jerusalem.

Our elected representatives and our appointed officials should resolutely hold open our policy
options for American interests. We surely don't want to find ourselves in the end limited to Iran
and Israel in the Middle East. If that means applying sanctions to our Israeli clients in the Middle
East -- clients to the extent of more than $3 billion in grants a year -- to prevent them from
preempting our own foreign policy options, so be it. Let us ponder the options, lest we find
ourselves held collective hostage to Israeli settlements in East Jerusalem.

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Professor Welty teaches courses on the Middle East at Wright State University. He has testified
on the future of U.S. foreign policy before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and visited
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