

The United States And The Arab-Israeli Conflict

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Abstract

Our hypothesis is that the US policy relating to the Arab-Israeli conflict has been biased in favor of Israel, predictably so, and effective in helping Israel achieve its goals, at the expense of the Palestinians and other Arabs. Even so, US policy has been indispensable to the advantage of Arabs in general and the Palestinians in particular, for without US intervention, Arab losses in the wars with Israel could have been larger, and their gains smaller or less realizable than they have been. The study will contain five sections.

The first section states the hypothesis and explores various meanings and perceptions of bias and its possible explanations as it applies to Israel.

The explanations range from American guilt reactions to the Holocaust, to the Jewish-Christian ethic, to the appearance of Israel as an underdog in the Middle East, and to the perception of the creation of Israel as a replay of the drama of the building of the US republic in America.

The second section will illustrate policy biases, and the consistency of that policy to the extent of its being predictable ever since the establishment of the state of Israel.

Section three will demonstrate the effectiveness of US policy in helping Israel realize its objectives while still retaining friendship with most Arab regimes, including the Palestine National Authority.

Section four will argue and illustrate the indispensability of US policy to the advantage of the Arabs, especially the Palestinians since 1948, by helping to reduce potential losses the Arabs could have suffered in their wars with Israel.

I will also show that most of the achievements of the Palestinians in retrieving land and establishing a pseudo-state in Palestine might have been unrealizable without US intervention because no other western power could have been as effective in bringing about those results.

The last section explores the pending issues between Israel and its neighbors and how US policy may still be indispensable to the Arab neighbors, particularly the Palestinians, in resolving these issues, including the permanent borders, refugee settlement, and future of

Jerusalem. The data and analysis will depend on library research. The method of analysis will be qualitative, historical, and interdisciplinary.

Introduction

Two attitudes toward the United States (US) are common in the Arab countries: general admiration and almost affection for the American people, and a contrasting strong displeasure toward US policies in the Middle East (ME) region. Regardless of how the Arab regimes act, the people, especially the Palestinians, blame the US for their political and territorial misfortunes and the victorious and secure penetration of Israel in Arab land. They blame the US also for disabling the United Nations (UN) and blocking implementation of UN resolutions relating to the Arab-Israeli conflict. It is not too difficult to document the extent of US role in weakening the Arab position in favor of Israel over the last half century.

I suggest that US policy in the ME has been biased, predictable, and effective in favor of Israel, but at the same time, it has been indispensable for the benefit of the Arabs, especially the Palestinians.

Since the Palestinians have no state and thus are excluded from international institutional protection, and the Arab countries have been unable or unwilling to help them, the US has become a sort of protector, even if only to serve Israel's interests. [For a look at the Arab-Israelis conflict within the context of Arab politics, Sela, 1998, esp. pp3 20-350.

For another interpretation of US policy, Aruri, 1996] . In the following section I shall explore the conceptual framework and illustrate the relevant features of the US policy in the region.

Next I shall try to explain the US bias and how that bias contrasts with the limited help the US has rendered to the Arabs. In section three I shall take a deeper look at US policies in the post-Gulf War period. I suggest that in spite of the geopolitical changes in the region, there has been no change in US policy toward the Arabs and Israel: bias for one and indispensability for the other. In the last section I shall offer a few remarks on what we might expect in the future of Arab-Israeli relations and the role the US may play.

Concepts and illustrations

Bias means intended favoritism toward one party or another while claiming to be a neutral broker or mediator. Bias is different from prejudice in the sense that the biased party is not prejudging but intentionally favoring one party over another for reasons of its own. When

bias is repeated in policies of the biased country, the bias becomes predictable almost to the extent of its becoming a self-fulfilling expectation. And when such biased policies achieve the implicit or unspecified objectives, those policies may be described as effective. In this sense, US policies in the Arab-Israeli conflict may be described as biased, predictable, and effective in realizing most of the Israeli/American implicit objectives, at the expense of the Arabs.

Indispensability means that certain achievements would not have been realizable without the given policies or actions, in which case those policies or actions may be described as indispensable for the achievers.

In this regard, US policies and actions have been indispensable for Israel, but they have been indispensable also for Arabs in general and the Palestinians in particular. While Israelis and Jews world-wide may acknowledge the important role the US has played in achieving their goals, the Arabs rarely acknowledge the positive impact the US has had in making possible for them to realize gains or to reduce potential losses in their relations with Israel.

The bias has been reflected in the political, military, and economic actions of the US toward the Arabs and Israel. [Suleiman, 1995; Neff, 1995, esp. ch. 5] For example, the US has always backed Israel in international forums, especially at the United Nations, by watering down critical resolutions against Israel, introducing competing resolutions, or by casting a VETO against the pending resolution to prevent its passage.

This explains why many resolutions passed by the General Assembly of the UN were not passed by the Security Council which has the power of implementation, in contrast to the General Assembly. However, even when certain resolutions were passed by the Security Council, as in the case of Resolutions 194, 242, and 338, implementation has been obstructed by the US, either by voting against establishing the machinery for implementation or by arguing for reinterpretation of the resolution, or by blocking any action against Israel as a violator. thus making implementation unfeasible. [Aruri, 1995; Bennis, 1996, esp. ch 9]

In 1947 the US supported the UN Partition Plan which provided for two separate states in Palestine, one Arab and one Jewish. However, once the war came to an end through a cease-fire, the US took a position against a state of Palestine and that position has held from the days of President Truman to the present. The closest the US has come to agreeing to the idea of a Palestinian state has been in the recent Camp David trilateral negotiations for a permanent peace agreement. Even then, nothing has been put down on paper to commit the US to support the establishment of a state of Palestine. In the 1948/9 war Israel occupied a third more territory than allocated to it by the UN Partition Plan which legitimized Israel's own

existence. Yet the US has always backed Israel in retaining that extra territory, though won by war, in violation of the UN Charter and to an extent of the Truman and Eisenhower Doctrines. [Encyclopaedia Britannica. Micropaedia III, 1974, p. 819] On the contrary, the US has helped Israel in absorbing immigrants and settling them in the occupied territory. This same biased approach has been evident with regard to Resolutions 242 and 338 which mandate withdrawal of Israel from territories occupied in 1967.

Although the US was instrumental in formulating and passing those resolutions, it has implicitly supported Israel in creating facts on the ground by building settlements on the occupied land in violation of the fourth Geneva Convention. US leaders have on occasion viewed the conflict with less bias than usual but only for brief periods and with no helpful results, as in the Roger Plan of 1969 which called for withdrawal from all occupied territories and opposed the “acquisition of territory by war.” [Naidu, 1982, ch. 5 and p.141]

An equally evident bias has been repeated in US attitudes toward violence by Arabs and Israelis. Violence by Arabs has almost always been described as terrorism while violence by Israel has been described as defense and protection of Israeli citizens and their national rights.

Apparently violence by the state and occupation of other countries' land by Israel is more justifiable than violence by other national groups trying to liberate their land and restore their rights. It is true that US policy statements never endorse violence as such, but US representatives have often obstructed condemnation of violence by Israel at the UN. The US has continued to supply arms and equipment that are used in carrying out violent attacks by Israel against the Arabs.

US bias may also be illustrated by reference to military and economic aid to Israel, compared with aid to the Arabs. Israel has, at least since the Kennedy administration, enjoyed the privilege of purchasing advanced weapons from the US, enough in quantity and quality to give it superiority over all its Arab neighbors combined. [Neff, 1998, ch. 8]

Often the sale of arms has been financed by the US, either through grants or loans that are later forgiven, or by joint experimentation and production of certain advanced jets and other weapons. The US has in fact never denied its objective of maintaining Israeli superiority and thus has implicitly supported Israeli infringements on its neighbors.

Economic aid to Israel from the US has always been an important resource, whether private or public. Even though Israel's economy is highly developed, US aid continues to flow in. Many Israeli economists question the justification for such aid, as a form of Israeli

dependence on the outside. Israel has received more public aid from the US than all Arab countries combined, even though the Arabs are more in need of aid than Israel.

In spite of the evident bias of US policies in favor of Israel, the role of the US in the Arab-Israeli conflict has been indispensable both to reduce potential losses of the Arabs and to facilitate the gains they have realized in their interaction with Israel. Going back to 1947/8, the US supported the Partition Plan which provided for an independent State of Palestine. The US has also helped to stop the war and institute a cease fire, thus limiting the potential damage to the Arabs, given that the Israelis had the power and momentum for further advance. The US supported Resolution 194 which up to now has been giving Israel headaches by putting in the hands of the Arabs a legitimate claim for return of the refugees or compensation, and for the internationalization of Jerusalem which neither Arabs or Jews accepted. The fact that the US has not recognized Israeli annexation of Jerusalem after 1967 leaves in the hands of the Arabs a legitimate claim for the old sector of the city as it was before the 1967 war.

The US played an important role in 1956 when Israel, in collaboration with France and Britain took over the Sinai and the Suez Canal zone. At the insistence of President Eisenhower those foreign occupiers had to withdraw from Egyptian territory. While Soviet Russia played a role, it was the US which made the withdrawal a reality. The US played a less dramatic but equally indispensable role after the war of 1967 by formulating and helping to pass Resolution 242 which has become the basis for negotiations between Israel and its Arab neighbors, on the premise of land for peace. Unfortunately the Palestinians did not accept that resolution until 1988. Egypt's and Syria's war with Israel started with major Arab victories, but the tide turned quickly and Egypt found its third Army besieged and threatened with annihilation. The US came to the rescue by arranging for a cease fire, safe passage for the Third Army, and negotiations that made it honorable for Egypt to work toward a peace agreement. US bias was even more evident under Henry Kissinger as secretary of state. Kissinger committed the US not to talk with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) until it renounces violence, recognizes the right of Israel to exist, and accepts Resolutions 242 as a basis for peace negotiations. Henry Kissinger also institutionalized the idea of step-by-step approach or incremental progress toward peace, rather than a comprehensive peace approach in which Israel would have to face all the Arab countries at the same time, as well as other international powers that may have agendas of their own unfavorable to Israel. The incremental approach gave Israel time to build settlements, modify the terrain of the

Occupied Territories, and thus create facts on the ground and reduce the chances of returning to the pre-1967 war boundaries. However, by his actions Kissinger also made it possible for the PLO to gain access to US policy makers and eventually to be recognized by the US as representative of the Palestinian people.

The Palestinian-Israeli war in Lebanon in 1982 was another episode in which the role of the US was indispensable. While the Palestinian fighters were able to stand their ground for a short time, the Israeli forces were able to overpower them, occupy Beirut, and have the Palestinian forces at their mercy. The US arranged for a safe passage of the Palestinian leaders and armed forces over to Tunisia and other places, still carrying their light arms.

While the US had no official contact with the PLO, it had indirect relations with the leaders at all times, thus giving hope that Palestinian rights may still be realized. President Carter was first to speak of legitimate rights of the Palestinians. Ronald Reagan and George Bush also hesitatingly mentioned legitimate rights, but more explicitly only after 1988 when the PLO complied with the terms established by Henry Kissinger almost 15 years earlier. [Tschirgi, 1989, pp.214-220] As for the economic role of the US, aid to the Palestinians until after the Gulf war was only indirect, namely through the UN and other NGOs in the form of humanitarian assistance.

It is not deniable that the US played important roles in one way or another that were beneficial to the Arabs, without hurting the Israelis--they may actually have benefited the Israelis by inducing them to compromise and thus keep the conflict at a manageable level. But was the role of the US indispensable? I suggest that it was, for a number of reasons. First, the US has been the closest big power to support and protect Israel and therefore had enough leverage to influence Israeli actions. Second, the US is the only power with enough clout to force resolutions in the UN [Ref. on US Dominance of UN]. Third, the US is the only country with enough economic resources and power to influence conditions in the ME, as buyer, seller, aid dispenser, and development and technology provider. Fourth, the US has been the only power willing to bear the responsibility fully and publicly to promote stability and peace in the ME. Other countries have played secondary roles while the US has been a major player at all times. Finally, the US is the only power with no colonial history in the region and therefore can claim (at least at the start) a certain degree of objectivity and neutrality. For all these reasons it seems that had the US not played the roles described above the relations between the Arabs and Israel might not have reached the level of mutual acceptance and coexistence they have realized.

Explaining US bias in the Arab-Israeli conflict

Bias in favor Israel may also be interpreted as bias against the Arabs, particularly the Palestinians. It may be reasonable that a bias should be associated in some way with national interest. Hence the bias against the Arabs may be a result of the relative weakness of the Arabs as allies to protect US national interest. The Arabs have been disunited; and they are economically and technologically underdeveloped. Regarding the conflict with Israel, they have rarely had a unified policy toward Palestine and Israel. Even the economic boycott they instituted against Israel was barely observed to make a difference. The Arabs rejected UN resolutions on Palestine and were defeated in their wars with Israel.

Hence, it is unlikely for a great power to side with countries that reject resolutions it sponsors and are unable to stand on their own in the battlefield. Furthermore, some of the Arab countries were on the side of the Eastern Bloc in the cold war. At the same time the Arabs represent a large population with vast territories, compared with tiny Israel and the few Jews that were apparently under attack in Palestine and the ME.

Sympathy for the underdog that stands against its enemy seems reasonable. Finally, the Arabs have no effective lobby in the US, and Americans know little about them, about the Palestinians, or about the injustices inflicted on them by the Arab-Israeli conflict. In view of these arguments, it may not be difficult to see the other side (the Israeli, Jewish, Zionist side) in a bright light as a potential ally and a positive force in the US national interest. However, there are other arguments which enhance the bias in favor of Israel.

The Israeli-Jewish-Zionist lobby has played a major role in domestic US politics and public information. Whether it is the Jewish vote, contributions by Jewish sympathizers and supporters, or their effectiveness in reaching the media and the public, the lobby's influence has been remarkable. Another basis for the bias is grounded in ethnicity and religion. Americans are highly influenced by what is regarded as the Judio-Christian ethics from which many of the rules of behavior in the western world are said to be derived. Therefore, it is natural to have a certain affinity to Judaism and Israel as partners in the creation of the Judio-Christian ethics. Another inducement for bias is the scientific and business super-achievement of Jews around the world and certainly in America where they occupy a disproportionately large space in business and the academy on the basis of merit and efficient networking. Such achievement can only draw admiration, even if coupled with envy.

Still another source of bias may have been the expectation that Israel, in spite of its socialist inclinations, would be a strong ally in the ME against Soviet power and as a protector of ME

oil. Given its technological and military superiority, Israel has seemed as the best contender for such a role, just as the British had viewed a future Jewish state in Palestine would be for their interests in the ME and India.

The role of the Holocaust may have been another highly influential source of sympathy for Israel. Western powers, including the US, might have been able to prevent the Holocaust, or at least stop it once it had become known to exist, but they did not. How much feelings of guilt their failure to do so may have generated and how much of that guilt has been transformed into sympathy for and aid to Israel is hard to tell. The fact that half a century later museums and symbolic reminders of the Holocaust are still being erected in the US may account for at least part of the bias, especially that certain Arab leaders expressed sympathy with Nazi Germany while the Holocaust was under way. Israel has in the process become a symbol of protection for the Jews against any recurrence of any such horrific tragedy against the Jewish people anywhere in the world.

Another source of bias may have been the ability of Jewish immigrants to transform the land of Palestine, before the establishment of the state of Israel. Jewish immigrants established highly productive modern agriculture. They learned certain techniques from the Arabs and built on them, applying scientific and creative approaches to increase productivity and develop the Jewish economy. They established industry and modern communities, with far more and better education than the Arab communities have had. Visitors, observers, and political commissions could not but be impressed by what the Jews in Palestine had accomplished before they had a state. It is true that they had resources, but they used the resources efficiently and productively.

This creativity in transforming Palestine may be the single most important source of US bias because it adds another major affinity between the builders of the Jewish Israeli society and the builders of the American society. Both were immigrants, fleeing prejudice; both introduced relatively advanced techniques they brought with them to overcome the obstacles of nature and the native populations. Both established modern industry and agriculture, far more advanced and productive than existed in the native sectors. Both were expansionists, including by force, and both have managed to utilize cheap labor to achieve their objectives: the Americans used slaves, Indians, Chinese, and Mexicans; the Israeli Jews have used Palestinians, Jordanians, Malaysians, and Portuguese among others. And both the US and Israel are described as superpowers, in the world and the ME respectively. The fact that both

have exploited other people, acquired territory by force, abused human rights may be a more binding element between the US and Israel than any other factor.

The Gulf war and the new US perspective

The Gulf war, first between Iraq and Iran, and then between Iraq and the international alliance on behalf of Kuwait, left important effects on the Arab-Israeli conflict and the role of the US in it. First, it exhausted Iraq and in large measure neutralized it vis-a-vis Israel. At the same time, it reminded Israel that it is vulnerable, especially after Iraq sent its SCUD missiles and the US had to rush the Patriot missile interceptor to Israel. The Gulf war made covert the split among the Arab countries, with some sending troops against Iraq as part of the alliance led by the US and Britain. The Gulf war brought Syria closer to the West as a member of the alliance, which also lessened the threat of war between Syria and Israel, assuming there was a threat. The Gulf war put Jordan and the Palestinians at odds with the US because they showed sympathy for Iraq against Kuwait and the alliance. Because of their stand toward the war, both lost economic aid from the Gulf countries and lost the job market they had dominated for a long time. As a result they were weakened economically and made more dependent on aid from the developed countries than they were before the war. [For important insights on this period see John Waterbury, ed. 1991, esp. pp. 22-26; Johns, in Grammy and Bragg, 1996, pp.250-64; Ben-Zvi, 1993, pp. 191-213]

The Gulf war coincided with the dissolution of the Soviet Bloc into independent republics, none of which could stand as a counter super power against the US in world affairs. Therefore, the role of Israel as a strong ally of the US in the ME may also have been reduced. The result of these developments is that the US had more leverage now than before in dealing with both Israel and the Arabs. However, in spite of these changed conditions, US policies toward the Arabs and Israel did not change. The bias in favor of Israel is still obvious and predictable, and US indispensability to the Arabs is as evident as ever. These continuing patterns are illustrated by the Bush and Clinton policies in the last decade. [Rabinovich, 1999; Hockstader, 2000, Clinton, 2000]

Though Israel was opposed to an international conference, the US proceeded to promote the Madrid Conference. However, the terms stipulated by Israel were applied almost in toto: a PLO delegation was excluded and West Bank Palestinians were integrated in the Jordanian delegation. Furthermore, the conference would not discuss the refugee issue, a Palestinian

state, the borders, or Jerusalem, although the Resolution 242 concept of land for peace was central to the conference.

Similarly, while George Bush and James Baker, his Secretary of State, concentrated on Syrian-Israeli negotiations, they at no time would explicitly support the idea of total withdrawal in return for peace. They wanted to negotiate the degree of withdrawal as Israel wanted. They also would not commit US support for negotiating a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace, opting for bilateral, incremental steps toward peace, as had been dictated by Kissinger. The Bush administration did begin talking to the PLO at a relatively low level, but only after Yasser Arafat had iterated his renunciation of violence, recognition of Israel's right to exist, and acceptance of Resolution 242 as stipulated by Kissinger years ago.

Bill Clinton has been described by Israeli newspapers as the best US president friend Israel has ever had. He followed the pattern of earlier administrations by supporting Israel's interests at the UN, by appointing major players in his administration with demonstrated sympathies with Israel, and by continuing economic and military aid to Israel, even when the uncooperative Benjamin Netanyahu was prime minister. Even so, President Clinton has taken major steps to promote peace and help the Arabs. The transition from Madrid to Oslo could not have happened without the US as a silent partner, as demonstrated by hosting the Handshake meeting between Rabin and Arafat at the White House in 1993 and the signing of the Declaration of Principles agreement between them. For the first time Palestinian and Israeli leaders were treated on equal terms and that experience has been repeated several times since then. Mrs. Clinton has taken the brave step of saying that the Palestinians deserve to have a state of their own; though the statement was disclaimed by the White House, the impact was obvious in terms of floating the idea from as close a source to the administration as could be. The US has also, since the Madrid conference, extended economic and technical aid to the Palestinians and urged other countries to do the same. Though aid to the Palestinians is minuscule compared with aid to Israel, its dispensation is critical for the survival of the Palestine National Authority, in spite of its being too closely controlled by the World Bank and other donor representative.

The US has also hosted signing the peace agreement between Israel and Jordan at the White House in 1994. Although that agreement was not controversial, its conclusion brought economic benefits for Jordan in the form of direct aid, debt forgiveness, and trade benefits. Since then the Clinton administration has played an intensive role to conclude peace

agreements, first between Syria and Israel and then between Israel and the Palestinians. In both the US bias and indispensability have been evident.

For example, it took the US a long time to admit that prime minister Rabin had agreed to full withdrawal from Syria. [Rabinovich, 1999] And when Israel offered to make concessions and withdraw from the Golan Heights, President Clinton declared then that the ball was in Syria's court, even though the proposed withdrawal was less than total as required by Resolution 242 which Israel has chosen to reinterpret to its advantage. The same bias has been demonstrated in the negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians. Though the UN resolutions call for the internationalization of Jerusalem and though the US has not recognized its unilateral annexation by Israel, the Clinton administration has been pressuring the Palestinians to accept less than full withdrawal from East Jerusalem which was occupied in 1967. Furthermore, though Resolution 242 calls for full withdrawal from

occupied land in return for peace, the US has been pressuring the Palestinians to agree to less than full withdrawal, on the assumption that full withdrawal would jeopardize the security of Israel, as Israel claims.

The US has hinted at the inevitability of creating a Palestinian state but has yet to declare its support for an independent state of Palestine. Thus Israel continues to be the favored party in the Arab-Israeli conflict, even when it violates UN resolutions, abuses human rights of the Palestinians, and continues to infringe on the sovereignty of its Arab neighbors. In spite of all this, the US continues to be indispensable for the Palestinians. President Clinton has extended his good will for a lengthy period at Camp David on behalf of a peace settlement. Even though the Camp David negotiations have not resulted in an agreement, the two parties have come closer to each other than ever before in negotiating the peace under auspices of the US. Once again the US has proved to be indispensable.

Concluding remarks

After two weeks at Camp David, the Palestinians and Israelis went home without a peace agreement. However, neither side, nor do US representatives call the results a failure. They have actually resumed talking, negotiating, and trying to find a solution acceptable to their constituencies, and with which they can live. These are positive signs in the sense that both sides are aware that the status quo is untenable, and they cannot go back to before Oslo, and therefore they can only move forward. They also know that moving forward by force is no longer feasible

Thus, any such move has to come by negotiation and peaceful means. [For some thoughts on this, Rabinovich, 1999, ch. VI] The Palestinians also know that in spite of all US rhetoric and pretensions, US policy remains biased in favor of Israel, and that Israel can wait a fairly long time to conclude a permanent peace. But the Palestinians do not have that luxury and they know that without US mediation it is unlikely that they would realize an acceptable peace agreement with Israel, especially one that brings with it economic benefits. Therefore, it seems that the trilateral relations between the US, Israel, and the Palestinians are most likely to continue, that the US remains indispensable, and that a permanent peace based on compromise by both parties while President Clinton resides in the White House is still a possibility.

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