

The U.S. Should Act as an Honest Broker

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The Israel lobby's powerful influence on U.S. Middle East policy has, for the most part, been largely negative. The lobby — working with Israel itself — has altered U.S. Middle East policy in ways that are in neither the American nor the Israeli national interest. To make that case, I will focus on the lobby's influence on U.S. policy towards the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

Unable to Pressure Israel

It has been the official policy of every U.S. president since 1967 to oppose the building of settlements in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. President George W. Bush, for example, has repeatedly requested that Israel halt settlement building. Yet no president has been able to put meaningful pressure on Israel to stop expanding the settlements. The seriousness of this problem is illustrated by what Israel did in the occupied territories between the signing of the Oslo Accords in September 1993 and the outbreak of the al-Aqsa intifada in September 2000. During that seven-year period, when the Clinton administration was committed to creating a Palestinian state and finally settling the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, Israel confiscated 40,000 acres (16,200 hectares) of Palestinian land, built 250 miles (400 kilometers) of connector and by-pass roads, doubled the number of settlers and built 30 new settlements.

Former President Bill Clinton, like his predecessors and his successor, could not use America's considerable leverage to halt this building spree. In fact, the Clinton administration effectively supported Israel's actions by protecting the Jewish state from criticism at the United Nations, giving it more foreign aid than any other country, and giving it unconditionally.

The fundamental reason that current and past presidents have been unable to put pressure on Israel to stop building settlements is the lobby. As

Haaretz senior political commentator Akiva Eldar stated in a recent U.S. TV interview, "The administration doesn't want to use its leverage, because the administration doesn't want to confront the political lobby... You can say this about this administration, when it comes to the Arab-Israeli conflict. It's purely domestic. Israel is not part of American foreign policy. Israel is a domestic policy."

Not in the U.S. National Interest

Nevertheless, Israel's policies in the occupied territories are not in America's national interest. There is an abundance of survey data and anecdotal evidence which shows that U.S. support for Israel's brutal treatment of the Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank, and U.S. support for Israel's efforts to colonize those territories, angers — if not enrages — a large percentage of the population in the Arab world.

As past events have shown, this anger has helped fuel terrorist activities against the U.S. both at home and abroad. It is important to note that Washington's support for Israel's policy towards Palestinians is not the only cause of America's terrorism problem, but it is a major cause. Specifically, it motivates some individuals to attack the U.S.; it serves as a powerful recruitment tool for terrorist organizations; and it generates sympathy and support for terrorists among huge numbers of people in the Arab world.

A critically important issue when talking about the U.S.' terrorism problem is the matter of how U.S. support for Israel's behavior towards the Palestinians relates to the events of Sept. 11. It is commonplace to hear Israel's supporters say that Osama bin Laden did not care much about Palestinians until recently, and he only seems to care now because it is an effective recruiting device. They also maintain that the events on 9/11 had nothing to do with Israel and those involved in the attack despised the U.S. because of its political and cultural values, not its Middle East policies.

This line of argument is frequently purveyed by key figures in the lobby like Robert Satloff from the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Harvard professor Alan Dershowitz and Dennis Ross of the Washington Institute, who said that bin Laden was merely "trying to gain legitimacy by implying that this attack on America was about the plight of the Palestinians."

A Cause of 9/11?

These claims are simply not true. It is clear from historical records that bin Laden has been deeply concerned about the plight of the Palestinians for a long period of time. That concern was reflected in his public statements throughout the 1990s, well before 9/11. Consider what Max Rodenbeck, the Middle East correspondent for *The Economist*, wrote in a review of two books about bin Laden, one of which was a compilation of his speeches: "Of all [the] themes, the notion of payback for injustices suffered by the Palestinians is perhaps the most powerfully recurrent in bin Laden's speeches."

Regarding the actual attack on 9/11, we know from the work of the bipartisan 9/11 Commission that U.S. support for Israel was a major cause of what happened that fateful day. Understandably, it was not the only cause, but it was a key cause. For example, the 9/11 Commission notes that bin Laden wanted to make sure that the attackers struck the U.S. Congress building in Washington, D.C., because it is the most important source of support for Israel in the U.S. The Commission also reports that bin Laden wanted to move up the date of the attacks twice because of events involving Israel — even though doing so would have increased the risk of failure.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, consider what the *9/11 Commission Report* said regarding the motives of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed (KSM), who it describes as the principle architect of the attacks. "By his own account, KSM's animus towards the U.S. stemmed not from his experiences there as a student, but rather from his violent disagreement with U.S. foreign policy favoring Israel."

It is hard to imagine more compelling evidence of the role that U.S. support for Israel played in inspiring the 9/11 attacks. In short, the unique relationship between Israel and the U.S. is helping to fuel America's terrorism problem, not solve it.

Alternatives without Two States

What about Israel's interests? Has U.S. support for its policies in the occupied territories been good for the Jewish state, or would it have been better served if the U.S. had pressured it to stop building settlements and allow for the creation of a viable Palestinian state?

It is difficult to see how there can be a meaningful two-state solution. The root of the problem remains Israel's control of large portions of the West Bank. It shows little interest in giving that land to the Palestinians. There is little public or elite support for the Clinton Parameters of December

2000, which are the only realistic basis for creating a viable Palestinian state. Furthermore, there is little reason to think that this situation is going to change any time soon. The U.S. is not going to apply pressure on Israel to leave the West Bank, and Israel is likely to continue building roads and settlements there, while the U.S. continues to support it unconditionally.

This discussion raises the obvious question: What does Israel's future look like in the absence of separate Jewish and Palestinian states living side-by-side? Given present circumstances, there are three possible alternatives, all of which involve creating a "Greater Israel" — an Israel that effectively controls both the West Bank and Gaza.

In the first scenario, Greater Israel could become a democratic bi-national state in which both Palestinians and Israeli Jews enjoyed equal political rights. This solution has been suggested by a handful of Jews and a growing number of Palestinians. However, the practical obstacles to this option are daunting, and bi-national states do not have an encouraging track record. Moreover, this option means abandoning the original Zionist vision of a Jewish state, since the Palestinians would eventually outnumber the

Jews in Greater Israel. There is little reason to think that Israel's Jewish citizens would voluntarily accept this solution, and one can also safely assume that individuals and groups in the lobby would have virtually no interest in this outcome.

Second, Israel could expel most of the Palestinians from Greater Israel, thereby preserving its Jewish character through an overt act of ethnic cleansing. Although a few Israeli hardliners have advocated variants on this approach, to do so would be a crime against humanity, and no genuine friend of Israel could support such a heinous course of action. It



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is worth noting that there are almost 5.2 million Palestinians in the lands that would comprise Greater Israel, and they would surely put up fierce resistance if Israel tried to expel them from their homes. This form of ethnic cleansing would not end the conflict; however, it would merely reinforce the Palestinians' desire for vengeance and strengthen those extremists who still reject Israel's right to exist.

Apartheid: The Likely Outcome

The final alternative, which is the most likely, is some form of apartheid, whereby Israel continues to increase its control over the occupied territories, but allows the Palestinians to exercise limited autonomy in a set of disconnected and economically crippled enclaves. Israelis and their American supporters invariably bristle at the comparison to white rule in South Africa, but that is the future Israel faces if it incorporates those territories while denying full political rights to an Arab population that will soon outnumber the Jewish population between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean.

Prime Minister Ehud Olmert said as much when he proclaimed earlier this year that if "the two-state solution collapses," Israel will "face a South African-style struggle." He went so far as to argue that "as soon as that happens, the state of Israel is finished." Similarly, Israel's Deputy Prime Minister Haim Ramon said that "the occupation is a threat to the existence of Israel." Other Israelis — including former Prime Minister and current Defense Minister Ehud Barak — as well as former U.S. President Jimmy Carter and Archbishop Desmond Tutu — have warned that continuing the occupation will turn Israel into an apartheid state.

Of course, the apartheid option is not a viable long-term solution either, because it is morally repugnant and because the Palestinians will continue to resist until they get a state of their own. This situation will force Israel to escalate the repressive policies that have already cost it significant blood and treasure, encouraged political corruption and badly tarnished its global image.

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These three possibilities are the only alternatives to a two-state solution, and no one who wishes Israel well should be enthusiastic about any of them. Unfortunately, the lobby has made it impossible for U.S. leaders to use the leverage at their disposal to pressure Israel to cease building settlements and allow the Palestinians to have their own state. In short, the lobby has

pushed policies regarding the Palestinian-Israeli conflict that are in neither country's interest.

Furthermore, the aforementioned policies are certainly not in the Palestinians' interest. Indeed, Israel's treatment of the Palestinians in the occupied territories is fundamentally at odds with widely accepted notions of justice and decency. Imagine if the roles were reversed and a powerful Palestinian state was taking land away from Jewish inhabitants and brutalizing them in the process. There would rightfully be a storm of protest in the U.S. and across Europe. Tremendous pressure would eventually force that Palestinian state to cease exploiting Jews and permit them to have a state of their own. But when Israel colonizes the West Bank and effectively turns Gaza into a giant prison for Palestinians who live there, the U.S. government not only does not protest, it backs Israel unreservedly. Most Americans offer hardly a word of protest about Israel's actions.

Treating Israel as a Normal Country

It is in the best interest of the U.S. to end its "special relationship" with Israel and treat it as a normal country. The U.S. should treat Israel the way it treats other democracies like Britain, France, Germany, and India. Like all countries, Israel sometimes pursues misguided policies, and its interests are not always the same as America's. Thus it makes no sense to back the Jewish state no matter what it does. Of course, when Israel acts in ways that are consistent with U.S. interests, Washington should back it. But when Israel behaves in ways that harm U.S. interests, Washington should distance itself from Israel and use its considerable leverage to get it to change its behavior.

Regarding the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the U.S. should act as an honest broker. In other words, Washington should pursue an even-handed policy towards the two sides. In particular, the U.S. should make clear to Israel that it must abandon the occupied territories and allow for the creation of a viable Palestinian state on those lands. It should be told that the U.S. will oppose, not tolerate, Israel's expansion in the West Bank.

Finally, the U.S. should not abandon Israel. On the contrary, the U.S. should defend Israel's right to exist within its pre-1967 borders with some minor modifications, and if Israel's survival is threatened, the U.S. should come to its aid.

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