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Here and Back Again: US National Security Interest in the Arab/Israeli Conflict

Miriam Keim

Since its declaration of sovereignty in 1948, Israel has fought frequent wars with its Arab neighbors – the Six Day War, the War of Attrition, and the First and Second Lebanon Wars, just to name a few. Numerous peace treaties have been drafted, signed, and sometimes enforced. However, even with the concerted efforts of members of the international community including the United States and the United Nations, a final settlement establishing regional peace has not been attained. Disagreements range from Israel's right to exist to the delineation of the borders for the proposed two states. Political leaders on both sides have agreed to, disagreed with, kept, and broken numerous promises and plans.

It would be easy to characterize the Arab/Israeli conflict as simply a religious disagreement: fiery rhetoric, often fueled by religious beliefs, is preached by both sides as to the legitimacy of the existence of Israel. Religion cannot be completely removed from the equation, as many contested sites, particularly in Jerusalem, have deep religious significance to Jews, Muslims, and Christians alike. However, the main motivator behind the conflict is land, with both Israelis and Palestinians claiming their rights to the area now known as Israel, as well as the disputed Occupied Territories, including the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.¹

Any workable plan for establishing peace must take into account the disparities between the two populations which live in such close proximity, but have starkly different standards of living. Israel is a first world country with a functioning economy and a government acknowledged by most of the

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world. The Palestinians are split into two groups, in Gaza and the West Bank, and there are many more still in refugee camps in neighboring countries. Both Gaza and the West Bank have semi-functioning governments, but they are unable to work together and much of the international community is opposed to working with Hamas in its current form. In 2006, pushed by the Bush Administration to hold democratic elections, Palestinians in the Gaza Strip decided to throw out the corrupt Fatah Party and instead award control to Hamas, “the largest and most influential Palestinian militant movement.”² Originating in the Muslim Brotherhood, the organization is responsible for terrorist activity throughout the West Bank and Gaza, including targeted killings of members of the defeated Fatah Party.

Economic growth cannot be overlooked in the peace process. Israel’s GDP is estimated at \$206.9 billion, whereas the West Bank and Gaza’s GDP is closer to \$12.79 billion.³ Encouraging news has recently been released by the World Bank concerning economic growth in both the West Bank and Gaza: “In the first half of 2010, the economy of WB&G continued to rebound and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) projects that real Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth will reach eight percent in 2010.”⁴ Both areas still have considerable ground to cover before they can be competitive with Israel, but compared to where there were just ten years ago, at the beginning stages of the second intifada, the advance is significant.

In an ideal world, both Israeli and Palestinian leaders would like their respective citizens to have exclusive control over the land now occupied by Israel. It is possible that ardent Zionists and extreme members of various Palestinian parties, including Hamas, the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), and Hezbollah, will never agree to anything other than complete control. Yet, since the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP) first examined the issue, the policy of a “two-state solution” has been seen by many as the answer to the conflict. The United States has supported this position. President Obama, in his speech at Cairo University declared: “the only resolution is for the aspirations of both sides to be met through two states, where Israelis and Palestinians each live in peace and security.”⁵ George Mitchell, the US Special Envoy for Middle

East Peace, has echoed the President's commitment to this solution in subsequent interviews.

US ATTEMPTS AT DIPLOMATIC INTERVENTION IN THE CONFLICT

In 1978, US President Jimmy Carter helped facilitate an Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty with the signing of the Camp David Accords. While the success of the Camp David Accords was important at the time, the world was of a different geopolitical power structure. The USSR was still a strong force; it would not enter Afghanistan and begin its slow decline in power for another year, and the dynamics of a bipolar world system were still locked in by the fierce battle between Washington and the Kremlin.

At the time of the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993, the political atmosphere of the world had changed. The USSR was no more, and independent states were establishing themselves again in Eastern Europe. The United States had successfully rallied world support and secured the Security Council's blessing for President George H.W. Bush's decision to invade Iraq and push Saddam Hussein out of Kuwait. Ready to tackle peace in the Middle East, an invitation to Israeli and Palestinian leaders was extended:

After extensive consultations with Arab states, Israel and the Palestinians, the United States and the Soviet Union believe that an historic opportunity exists to advance the prospects for genuine peace throughout the region. The United States and the Soviet Union are prepared to assist the parties to achieve a just, lasting and comprehensive peace settlement, through direct negotiations along two tracks, between Israel and the Arab states, and between Israel and the Palestinians, based on United Nations Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338. *The objective of this process is real peace.* (Emphasis added)⁶

With this notice, the first post-Cold War peace attempts were launched. Negotiations stalled and President Bush was replaced by President Bill Clinton, but eventually both the Israelis and the Palestinians agreed to sit down and

talk in January 1993. Nine months later, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat signed the historic Oslo Accords on the White House lawn. With this, Israel recognized Arafat's Palestinian Liberation Organization as the representative of the Palestinian people and signalled its willingness to negotiate with them. Arafat in turn "acknowledged Israel's right for a safe and peaceful existence."⁷ The PLO was now in charge of selecting an interim government for a Palestinian state. Finally, almost 60 years after the UN's original two state plan, peace was near.

Despite efforts from the Clinton Administration, this plan too was fated for more conflict:

The Clinton team focused intensely, even obsessively on keeping the Israeli-Palestinian tack alive and maintaining momentum in the talks, but at the expense of debilitating actions by the parties – Palestinian violence and incitement, Israeli Settlement expansion, Palestinian Authority (PA) corruption and constant backsliding by both sides – that ultimately overwhelmed and defeated the process.⁸

While President Clinton continued pursuing peace, several other meetings were arranged and publicized over his presidency, and the situation in Israel continued to deteriorate. With the Al-Aqsa, or Second Intifada, starting in late 2000, the final months of President Clinton's presidency were marred by the reports of violence throughout the region.

The environment that greeted President George W. Bush had deteriorated drastically since the signing of the Oslo Accords. Additionally, some felt that "the Bush 43 approach to the conflict lack both commitment and a sense of strategic purpose."⁹ The administration was not pulled towards Jerusalem, but instead set their sights further east, to Iraq and Saddam Hussein. Following the attacks of September 11, 2001, President Bush chose to focus first on Afghanistan, and then Iraq. In the midst of the Second Intifada, American interest at the top level was pulled away from Israel and towards a different target. Like his successor, though, Bush was not able to stay away from the conflict long and in 2003, "The Quartet" – the United States, the European Union, Russia, and the United Nations – released a "Roadmap for Peace." Announced soon after US troops

overthrew Saddam in Iraq, the plan set forth “an ambitious three-stage, performance based plan to stabilize Israeli/Palestinian relations, bolster Palestinian institutions, and move the parties back to negotiations over a two-state settlement.”¹⁰ Now, while engaged in building a democracy in Iraq, the United States would also be encouraging the same activity with the Palestinians.

This plan lead up to the 2006 elections in the West Bank and Gaza through which Hamas won control of the Gaza Strip. Their conclusion unforeseen, the elections highlighted the dangers of democratic societies: sometimes the voting population wants someone who is an unimaginable or undesirable choice in the perspective of outside powers. Fatah, although corrupt and an unsavory ally for the United States, was a known quantity. Not only was Hamas a new system to learn, but its penchant for terrorist acts caused diplomatic headaches for the United States. Because US laws against financing terrorism prevented giving money to the government in charge, the Roadmap to Peace now had a new obstacle to surmount in order to build Palestinian civil society with the hopes of a two state solution.

Another change to the peace process came with the November 2004 death of Yasser Arafat, long time leader of the PLO, cosigner of the Oslo Accord, and a revered figure throughout the Palestinian population. He was mourned throughout the Arab world, but Israelis greeted his death as an event that might lead towards an eventual peace. However, just a little over a year after Arafat’s death, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon suffered a major stroke from which he never recovered. With new leadership for both sides in place, the Roadmap was approached again, but as of yet few significant gains have been made. This is due in large part to the lack of a valid leader for all Palestinians, creating a situation in which there is no one head to negotiate with.

President Barack Obama ushered in a new age of diplomacy with his inauguration in 2009. Recently, direct talks have been attempted, but little has come from them. In the short time that he has been in office, Obama has faced many of the same roadblocks that stood in the way of his predecessors. The building of Israeli settlements continues to stir tensions in Jerusalem and the West Bank, while rockets from Gaza are fired more

often than Israelis are comfortable with. Issues that have been discussed since the first attempts at a peace and a two state solution are still present today. Where should the borders be drawn? Will right of return be enforced? How does an independent state of Palestine exist, when it is split in half by its neighbor? And the more modern question, how can a Palestinian state that is internally divided be united?

US STRATEGIC INTERESTS IN THE CONFLICT

The United States has financially and diplomatically supported Israel since its inception, but it also has a strong interest in the Arab community. The instability that the Israeli/Palestine conflict contributes to the region greatly hinders positive development and seriously threatens peace efforts. This instability is a particular concern for US national security, as some of the grievances expressed by terrorist organizations in the Muslim world stem from America's involvement and support of Israel.¹¹

Perhaps the most pressing issue currently is the Iranian regime's attempts to secure nuclear technology. Despite assurances from Iran that the nuclear technology it is developing will be for energy purposes only, many in the international community remain unconvinced that their true aim is not to secure nuclear weapons. The recent Wikileaks scandal has shown that this fear is held not only by Western countries, but also by Muslim countries such as Saudi Arabia.¹² No country is more worried about the threat of a nuclear Iran than Israel. Faced with overwhelming threats from other Arab countries in the past, Israel has won militarily. A nuclear attack would be different and much harder to defend against. The existence of the program, coupled with Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's calls for the destruction of Israel, has led to ever-increasing tension in the region. While the US and other international powers have worked to halt Iran's nuclear developments, Iran's willingness to capitalize on this tension only increases instability.

President Obama has promised to drawdown troops from both Iraq and Afghanistan in the coming years. On August 31, 2010 the last official US combat troops left Iraq, although over 50,000 "non-combat" troops are still on the ground.¹³ These troops are supposed to be redeployed by

2011, although the date of their final departure may depend on the ability of Iraqi forces. Similarly, in Afghanistan, the Obama administration has begun training local security forces to take over combat duties, with the hopes of redeploying American troops from the country by 2014.¹⁴ Even with troop withdrawals, the threat of terrorism remains high in the region, with increased activity being seen in Yemen and Pakistan.

If the United States was successful in helping bring a resolution to the Arab/Israeli conflict, Middle Eastern aggression against the United States might lessen. In past peace attempts, the Arab League was heavily invested in any action on the Palestinians' part and would undoubtedly be involved in approving and implementing any two-state plan that would lead to peace. If sincere, the Arab League's commitment to peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians would represent an ideological shift in most of its members' thoughts towards the existence of Israel. If granted assurance that their right to exist was acknowledged by the Arab League members, Israel could feel more secure. Palestinians, backed by fellow Muslim states and much of the West, could begin to build their own state. Stability between the Israelis and Palestinians, and acceptance by Arab states of the existence of Israel would allow the United States to focus more of its attentions in other areas of the Middle East, and would potentially increase the effectiveness of its foreign policy in the region.

AMERICAN USE OF MILITARY AND HARD POWER

The US military is the strongest fighting force in the world, providing troops not only for its own missions, but also to supplement the forces of multilateral organizations, such as NATO and the United Nations. In Afghanistan, even with coalition forces in place, American troops outnumber those from any other single country.¹⁵ With military superiority over every other country, the United States could in theory use this power to solve conflicts around the world. Korea, Vietnam, and Bosnia are three examples of the use of "hard power" with varying degrees of success and failures.

Despite the United States' ability to use military power, it is difficult to find many calls for such power to be used in the Arab/Israeli debate.

Hard power has not been seen as a serious option for US responses to various Israeli actions, ranging from expanding settlements to blockading Gaza to full scale invasions. Besides the difficulties of fighting troops armed with one's own technology and well trained at using it, the domestic backlash that a US president would face for ordering such an attack could be catastrophic to any future political goals.

Former Israeli Ambassador to the United States, Moshe Arens, in an interview dated April 3, 2010, proclaimed that "the Obama administration's leverage is beginning to sound like 'hard power'—brutal even—to get Israel to toe the line."¹⁶ He referred to the Obama administration's objection to new settlements being built in Jerusalem, a development that was announced while Vice President Joe Biden was visiting the country. A month later, WorldNetDaily announced that "a US plan envisions stationing international troops along Israel's border with a future Palestinian state...."¹⁷ However, the details of this plan are far from brutal, as it envisions international peace keepers watching the borders, similar to UN forces in the Sinai on the border between Egypt and Gaza, and on Israel's northern border with Lebanon. Far from the combat troops we see pictures of in Iraq or Afghanistan, these troops would resemble the lightly armed, if armed at all, blue helmets we so often see in Africa.

AMERICAN USE OF SOFT POWER AND PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

Regardless of the exact reason, the United States has traditionally not engaged in "hard power" with regards to the Arab/Israeli conflict. Consequently an examination of its policy becomes a search for the use of "soft power" instead. Soft power, or the ability of a "country to get what it wants by attraction rather than through coercion," is a concept first set forward by Joseph Nye in order to explain why the United States was as successful in its diplomacy as it came to be.¹⁸ In Nye's words "this attractive, or 'soft' power, stemmed from American culture, values, and policies that were broadly inclusive and seen as legitimate in the eyes of others."¹⁹ In others words, the United States relies on other people wanting to be like Americans, or at least accepting their way of life.

To this end, American government agencies, especially the State

Department, rely heavily on the tools of soft power: “public diplomacy, broadcasting, exchange programs, development assistance, disaster relief, military-to-military contacts.”²⁰ Public diplomacy, a term that has been used frequently relative to the WikiLeaks release, “refers to government-sponsored programs intended to inform or influence public opinion in other countries; its chief instruments are publications, motion pictures, cultural exchanges, radio and television.”²¹ While one might wonder if public diplomacy sometimes crosses into the realm of propaganda, the concept allows for a break from traditional diplomacy. Instead of interacting solely on the official diplomatic level, the United States uses public diplomacy to reach the citizens of the country it is trying to influence directly, by “winning the hearts and the minds” of the people.

But how does a nation apply public diplomacy or soft power in a country that is already so similar to itself? Israel is a democracy, and its people enjoy many of the same freedoms held by inhabitants of the United States. The attractiveness of American culture to a Pole at the end of the Cold War, is bound to have been considerably higher than it is for a man walking down the street in Tel Aviv today. The use of soft power with the Palestinians is problematic as well, because the United States is seen as pro-Israel within the Arab world. Indeed, President Obama in his speech in Cairo stated:

America’s strong bonds with Israel are well known. This bond is unbreakable. It is based upon cultural and historical ties, and the recognition that the aspiration for a Jewish homeland is rooted in a tragic history that cannot be denied.²²

Despite this, American authority has often been inserted as a mediator in the conflict, particularly in the unipolar world that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union. The issue facing American diplomats in the Arab/Israeli conflict is not one of trying to win the Palestinians over, convincing them of the benefits of the United States. In the same speech, President Obama also laid out an American understanding of the Palestinian struggle:

On the other hand, it is also undeniable that the Palestinian

people – Muslims and Christians – have suffered in pursuit of a homeland. For more than 60 years they've endured the pain of dislocation. Many wait in refugee camps in the West Bank, Gaza, and neighboring lands for a life of peace and security that they have never been able to lead. They endure the daily humiliations – large and small – that come with occupation. So let there be no doubt: The situation for the Palestinian people is intolerable. And America will not turn our backs on the legitimate Palestinian aspiration for dignity, opportunity, and a state of their own.²³

Indeed, one of the biggest hurdles to overcome is not feelings towards Americans, but instead to Israelis, still seen as the occupiers who have stolen Palestinian lands. US national security interests in the region may desire peace in order to obtain stability, but how does an outside power contribute to changing the feelings of citizens in internal struggle who are not necessarily opposed to the outside force?

The answer to both of the above dilemmas seems to be coercive power. This author would argue that American policy has adopted neither a solely hard or soft power position, especially in its dealings with Israel. Elements of both exist. Soft power efforts are used within the West Bank and Gaza. The Israeli diplomatic visits to the United States before the 1967 war, to gauge whether they would receive US support or military opposition if need be, show the importance of American military power in the region. While the United States may not send its own troops into battle in Gaza to fight Hamas rockets, it does not necessarily spring into action to halt Israeli military campaigns, tacitly allowing damage to be done by Israeli forces in retribution for attacks against their country. One could argue that this lack of action is in itself the exercise of a type of hard power.

One form of power does speak to both the Israeli and the Palestinian/ Arab worlds. "For policymakers, foreign assistance plays a key role in advancing US foreign policy goals in the Middle East."²⁴ Monetary assistance has tremendous effects on American power in the region. This funding, given in various forms to both the Israeli and Palestinian governments, falls somewhere in between the use of hard and soft power;

a coercive power, if we may.

For the Israelis, American financial assistance has been crucial to its existence. According to the Congressional Research Service:

Since 1976, Israel has been the largest annual recipient of US foreign assistance and is the largest cumulative recipient since World War II. Strong congressional support for Israel has resulted in Israel's receiving benefits that may not be available to other countries. For example, Israel can use US military assistance for research and development in the United States and for military purchases in Israel. In addition, all US foreign assistance earmarked for Israel is delivered in the first 30 days of the fiscal year. Other recipients normally receive their aid in staggered installments at varying times. According to the Obama Administration's 2011 Congressional Budget Justification (CBJ) for Foreign Operations, "US assistance is also aimed at ensuring for Israel the security it requires to make concessions necessary for comprehensive regional peace."²⁵

US military assistance to Israel is especially important to note. Before the 1967 war, France was the primary supplier of Israel's military supplies, but due to pressure from the Arab community, Charles de Gaulle ended his country's assistance. This void was filled by the United States, which, since President Eisenhower, had been committed to ensuring Israel's safety. During the Cold War, Israeli pilots flew Western planes against the Soviet-made MiGs provided to their Arab enemy. Just as the United States was committed to Israel's military preponderance then, it remains committed to a militarily strong Israel that maintains "its qualitative military advantage [which] enhances security by preventing regional conflict and builds the confidence necessary for Israel to take calculated risks for peace."²⁶

The United States also provides funding for Palestinian authorities, but in a much smaller amounts and with a much more restricted distribution. From the report cited above:

Since the death of Yasser Arafat in November 2004, US

assistance to the Palestinians has averaged about \$388 million a year. During the 1990s, US foreign aid to the Palestinians averaged approximately \$75 million per year. Most US assistance to the Palestinians is provided through USAID's West Bank and Gaza program. USAID allocates funds for projects in sectors such as humanitarian assistance, economic development, democratic reform, improving water access and other infrastructure, health care, education, and vocational training (currently most, if not all, funds for the Gaza Strip are dedicated to humanitarian assistance and economic recovery needs). By law, US assistance to the West Bank and Gaza Strip, as well as for all other aid recipients, must be vetted and audited to ensure that no US funds are provided to or through any individual, private or government entity, or educational institution that advocates, plans, sponsors, engages in, or has engaged in, terrorist activity.²⁷

While funding for the Palestinians has increased significantly, it still reaches nowhere near the more than \$3 billion granted to Israel on a yearly basis. Additionally, unlike Israel, Palestinians do not receive military aid or the generous allowances for research and development of military technology. Instead, they received funds for humanitarian assistance, economic development, and other infrastructure issues. Highlighted in the passage above is another problem faced by American diplomats and policy makers: the presence of Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

In 2006, prompted by the Bush Administration to hold the elections, Palestinians in the Gaza Strip decided to no longer be governed by the corrupt Fatah Party, and instead awarded control to Hamas, the "the largest and most influential Palestinian militant movement"²⁸ Because it is labeled a "foreign terrorist organization" by the US State Department, no American funds can be delivered to the Hamas-run government in Gaza.²⁹ Since the majority of the funding comes through USAID, a government organization often associated with soft power, US assistance to the West Bank and Gaza looks much more like aid given to other developing countries around the

world. And, as with other developing countries, Palestinians receive aid from sources other than the United States:

The EU is currently the largest multinational donor to the Palestinian Authority. On 19 January the Palestinian Prime Minister and a representative of the Commission signed an agreement to pay EUR 158.5 million in support of the Palestinian Authority's recurrent expenditure for 2010.³⁰

The presence of this foreign money raises an important question for American foreign policy. If stability in the Arab/Israeli conflict is an important goal for the United States, is it wise to allow greater assistance to be given by another government? While one might hope that the European Union has goals similar to the United States for its security, is the American position weakened because the Palestinian community receives significantly less US aid money than is granted to Israel? With the United States still spearheading peace efforts, it seems unlikely that the EU has usurped American importance in the eyes of the Palestinians, but seeds have been sown.

CONCLUSION

In an age in which Russia and China are both amassing power and resources and are relatively unlikely to worry about the side activities of governments that they partner with, the United States runs the threat of being replaced in its importance if it is unable to increase its standing within the Arab world. While America has acted as an important mediator of the conflict in the past, the rise of other powers allows the possibility that the United States will no longer be the driving force behind future peace accords. This is a dangerous situation for the United States; it must use its resources to combat that possibility.

As US national security strategy advances, "in the present strategic environment, defined most notably by the threat from al Qaeda, the broader struggle against Islamist militancy and the ongoing challenges of the U.S. occupation of Iraq, Arab/Israeli peacemaking has become even more important."³¹ With troop drawdowns in Iraq and Afghanistan,

Iranian nuclear threats, radical Islam continuing its spread throughout the Middle East, and the United States' ever present need for energy, stability will be at a high premium. While there is no unitary solution to the ills of the Middle East – the region is far too diverse for that to be possible – the United States must prioritize what conflicts it *wants* to have an impact on, with some consideration to what conflicts it *can* have an impact in.

The Israeli/Palestinian debate will not disappear. It will not dwindle down or become able to be pushed away when inconvenient. Instead, the Arab/Israeli conflict is of strategic interest to the United States, and America's close relationship with Israel ensures that this will remain the case. To preserve the credibility of the United States in the Arab world, and to manage the conflict, the United States will have to decide how to employ its hard and soft powers in more effective manners

If the Arab/Israeli question is of strategic interest to the United States, how then should it proceed in shaping the conflict and any resolution towards peace? Above all the United States must determine what level of resolution it will be able to achieve that will allow for stability. With years of grievances suffered by both sides, it may be generations before any meaningful conflict transformation occurs, before Israelis and Palestinians accept each other and allow for open democracies to exist side by side. For the immediate future, the goal of conflict management is more attainable.

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