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Introduction: Where Does Israel Fit In?

Dennis Ross

The theme of where Israel fits into American politics and policy tends to produce debates that typically generate more heat than light. Arguments are almost always heavy on assertion and sparse on facts. Yet, as a practitioner of policy on the Middle East in five different administrations and as a political appointee of four Presidents, I have had an interesting vantage point from which to assess this issue.

For one thing, I am struck by the fact that in nearly every administration of which I was a part, Israel figured prominently in the US approach to Middle East policy. For those administrations in which the pursuit of Arab-Israeli peace was the key priority this should come as no surprise. What may come as a surprise is that none of the administrations in which I played a role had a fundamental approach that was decided by political considerations.

In the Arab Middle East, this will come as a surprise because the narrative that has developed over time in most Arab countries is that political considerations drive or determine what the United States does in the Middle East. Similar to the so-called realists in our country who believe that narrow interests like oil should decide our approach to the region, many in the Middle East cannot conceive that US support for Israel could be driven by anything but politics. They argue that our interests should dictate support for the Arabs, not Israel. However, not a single Arab country—even during this period of “awakening”—is characterized by democracy, the rule of law, and the credible separation of legislative, executive and judicial powers. Israel, on the other hand, does enjoy these features, which creates a bond and a set of shared values with the United States.

Historically, Arab leaders were no doubt reluctant to call attention to what Israel shares with the United States; it would be a reminder of what Arab publics lacked. Moreover, it was far easier to try to say that the Americans were governed by their politics and not their interests—and to blame the policies that they did not like on our politics. While it might be understandable for those in the Arab world to try to explain our policy in such a fashion, the “realists” in this country have neither the excuse nor the reason to fixate on politics instead of shared values and interests.

Those who have wanted to attribute our Middle East policy to politics—or more typically to the “Israeli lobby”—have done so largely because they do not like the US approach. They have wanted us to either distance ourselves from or impose greater pressure on Israel. They see the association with Israel as costing us in our relations with Arab countries and believe that we could do much more with them if only we were not saddled with our commitments to Israel or if only the Palestinian conflict no longer existed. Indeed, since Israel’s emergence as a state there has been an abiding conventional wisdom among many in the US national security establishment that if only Israel did not complicate our life or if only the Palestinian problem did not exist, our difficulties and the conflicts in the Middle East would disappear.

One can find such views embedded in US administrations going back to the period even before Israel became a state. The opposition of George Marshall and realists such as George Kennan and Loy Henderson to the partition of Palestine and later to our recognition of an Israeli state was based on the presumption that it would cost us our Arab friends and permit the Soviets to exploit Arab anger and gain entrée into the region. Even after the Soviets supported the partition plan in the UN, Kennan and Henderson would write a joint memo in January 1948 arguing for us to reverse US support for partition (United States Department of State). And although President Truman would not reverse our position, he would accept the need to impose an arms embargo shortly after the partition plan was adopted. The US embargo, however, penalized only one side: the Yishuv (the Jewish community in Palestine), because the British were providing arms to Iraq, Transjordan and Egypt—arms which were then supplied to the Arabs of Palestine. Marshall and others resisted political pressure to provide arms to the Yishuv on the grounds that if we provided arms to the Jews, the Arabs would never forgive us and we would lose our position in the Middle East to the Soviets. And, yet when the Soviets provided arms to the Jewish forces in Palestine through the Czechs in April and May of 1948, the sky did not fall. Yet, we still would not end the embargo on arms. That

embargo continued even after Israel was declared as a state—and the argument that spawned it failed to be discredited.

It was not until the Kennedy Administration that the United States would begin providing more than small arms to Israel, although President John F. Kennedy faced extensive internal resistance to doing so. Lyndon Johnson would then be the first American President to authorize the transfer of offensive weapons like planes and tanks to Israel. Ironically, it was US military support for Israel—which did not become central until after the 1973 war—that ultimately led Egyptian President Anwar Sadat to see the US as the only possible broker for peace. Only the United States, in his eyes, could affect Israeli policy and permit him to recover Egyptian land.

Rather than preventing ties to the Arab states, then, the US relationship with Israel actually created an incentive for some to turn to us. To be sure, others like the Saudis did feel defensive about their ties to the United States because of our support for Israel. And surely the Saudis, Jordanians and others have consistently complained about Israeli policies and told countless American officials how our support for Israel complicates our position in the area and feeds the anger of the “street” toward the United States. The perceived cost of the US-Israeli relationship—and the consequences for us and the region of not settling the Palestinian conflict—has remained a staple for realists in this country and has been embedded in parts of the national security bureaucracy since Truman’s time. Consider that in July of 2013, General James Mattis, recently retired as the head of Central Command, the military command responsible for the greater Middle East, said in a speech in Aspen that our inability to resolve the Palestinian conflict was costing us terribly in the region and preventing the security cooperation we needed with Arab governments (Eran).

For Mattis, the Palestinian issue was at the center of concerns in the Middle East and this was the paramount problem we must solve in the summer of 2013—at a time when the conflict in Syria had already made over one-third of all Syrians refugees and claimed over 100,000 lives; when the Egyptian military had intervened to remove President Morsi and begun a crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood; when the Iranian nuclear program showed no signs of abating but a new Iranian president had been elected largely because of the pressure of American sanctions; when violence in Iraq, at least in part because of the war in Syria, had returned to the 2008 levels; when the turmoil in Yemen and Libya showed no signs of abating and a political transition in Tunisia was moving in fits and starts. If the Palestinian issue disappeared to tomorrow, it would not alter any of these conflicts or realities in the region.

I don't say this to minimize the value or importance of settling the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. I have spent the last thirty years trying to contribute to resolving that conflict because on its own merits it needs to be resolved and because it is an evocative issue in the region. It certainly affects what key Arab leaders feel they can do with Israel and makes many defensive about their ties to the United States. Not to mention that the Arab publics—having been socialized on hatred of Israel by their governments—have a profoundly negative view of Israel.

But several points should be understood: First, the Saudis and others base their ties to the United States on their needs and priorities and not our relationship with Israel. They have seen us as the guarantor of their security and as long as they perceive this to be the case, will not let their relations with America drop below a certain level. Moreover, even if the Palestinian issue did not exist there would also be a ceiling above which the Saudis and others would not let the relationship go. They want to keep US military presence limited on their soil because they worry that it would be a point of internal destabilization—that al Qaeda, the Muslim Brotherhood, or the Iranians would be sure to try to exploit the appearance of their dependence on us. Second, the region today is consumed by upheaval that is unrelated to the Palestinian issue. The preoccupation is on that upheaval and it will not go away any time soon. Indeed, American problems with the Gulf States today are far more related to their concerns about the US approach to Iran, Syria and Egypt than about Israel. Third, it is the very preoccupation with all other issues that ironically creates space to try to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict at this point—and we are right to try to resolve it lest the current relative stability in the West Bank disappear.

General Mattis' observations remind us that old habits and ways of thinking die hard. Even when the circumstances should dictate otherwise and force us to question our long-standing assumptions, it is hard to give up beliefs that have become cemented over time. Indeed, just as Israel has not undermined our position in the Middle East and US Presidents have actually seen cooperation and sustaining a commitment to Israel to be in our interest, our politics have not mandated our posture in the region.

To be sure, Congress generally has been supportive of Israel even when differences have emerged between American Presidents and their Israeli counterparts over Israeli policies. In order to get the Airborne Warning and Control Systems (AWACS) sale to Saudi Arabia through the Senate, for instance, President Ronald Reagan would say that he “experienced one of his

toughest battles of my eight years in Washington” because “Israel had very strong friends in Congress” (Reagan 416). A year later in December 1982, notwithstanding deep differences between the Reagan Administration and Israel over its war in Lebanon, siege of Beirut, and continued presence around the city, Congress approved \$250 million in assistance for Israel over the strong opposition of President Reagan and Secretary George Shultz. Where congressional prerogatives are strong—on appropriating money or authorizing arms sales, for instance—administrations have felt the weight of their influence. And, surely congressional attitudes are much more subject to political pressures. But even here, Israel as a brand has credibility in this country. It is seen to embody American values and it is seen as an American friend in a region where there are few who actually do embody our values or can be counted on to consistently support US policies. Even in congressional districts with little or no Jewish presence, there is a tendency to support Israel, and national support for Israel in all polls tends dwarf that of any of the Arab states or polities.

So there is something beyond politics that explains support for Israel in the country and in Congress. That said, congressional support for Israeli policies is more likely to reflect the position of those who are active in the Jewish community than in the executive branch. Here again, however, Congress does not make American foreign or national security policy and congressional positions have not necessarily deterred American Presidents from pursuing what they think our interests require in the Middle East. Indeed, even knowing they might have to expend political capital to overcome potential congressional opposition, Presidents have been willing to do so if they felt our interests in the region required it. And, truth be told, they usually succeeded when they did so.

From the Carter administration’s provision of F-15s to Saudi Arabia to the Obama administration’s advanced aircraft and helicopter sales to the Saudis, American Presidents have typically prevailed on controversial arms transfers even if, as in Reagan’s case, it took some real time and effort—and some understandings and compensation to Israel—to do so.

Even George H. W. Bush, when he opposed Israel’s request for \$10 billion in loan guarantees in 1991 because of his opposition to Israeli settlement activity and policy, was able to block the Shamir government’s request notwithstanding considerable congressional support for it. Ultimately, it is the executive branch that formulates and implements foreign policy and national security; the Congress can affect what Presidents do in foreign policy but clearly do not determine what paths or priorities Presidents adopt.

And, notwithstanding the Walt-Mearsheimer school of realism, every US President for whom I was a political appointee—Reagan, Bush 41, Bill Clinton, and Barak Obama—defined their national security priorities based on what they thought was right and necessary for the country and not what they thought the “lobby” would support or oppose. Their approach to Israel reflected different mindsets: Reagan for instance felt a deep, emotional attachment to Israel but was still prepared to take steps that the Israeli government completely opposed. Indeed, the President decided after the Israeli siege of Beirut and the expulsion of the PLO that the US needed to make a push on peace, and he launched the Reagan Plan—a plan he knew Prime Minister Menachem Begin would oppose. George H. W. Bush, as noted above, opposed loan guarantees to Israel even after Israel absorbed Iraqi SCUD missile attacks during the first Gulf War and acceded to our request not to retaliate lest it put a strain on our coalition and shift the focus in the war. Clinton shared a deep and abiding connection to Israel, and enormous respect for Prime Minister Rabin, but he could also press Israeli Prime Ministers Benjamin Netanyahu and Ehud Barak on the peace issue—a central focus of his Administration. President Obama could go to Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and reach out to the Muslims around the world in a speech in Cairo and not go to Israel as a way of reaching out to Muslims and distancing from Israel given his desire in his first year to demonstrate how different his presidency would be from that of George W. Bush. Later, he would press for President Hosni Mubarak to leave office given a perception that this was the key to managing change in Egypt—a position that Israelis, and the Gulf States, profoundly opposed.

And, of course, George W. Bush did not go to war in Iraq because of Israel. The Israelis felt the threat was Iran and not Iraq and preferred that our focus and efforts at disarmament—whether diplomatic or military—be riveted on the Iranians. But President Bush had a different preoccupation after 9/11.

President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu may share a preoccupation with Iran. Indeed, no issue has garnered more time on President Obama’s national security agenda than Iran and its nuclear program. In no small part this has been the result of concerns that Israel might launch a military strike otherwise. The Israeli concerns helped create a sense of urgency, but even if Israel were not preoccupied with what it perceives as an existential threat from Iran’s having a nuclear weapon, President Obama would still have felt the need to give this issue great priority. His non-proliferation agenda and his genuine fears about the consequences for the Middle East of an Iran nuclear weapons’ capability made him believe this was an issue that threatened vital US

national security interests. Israel's concerns did not create this priority, even if they added to the urgency with which the Administration formulated its policy. Still, while Obama has agreed with Netanyahu strategically, they have not necessarily agreed on the tactics—with the Israeli prime minister uneasy about what the US might accept as a diplomatic outcome and feeling the need for Iran to be more certain that it would face the use of force if diplomacy failed.

To put all this in perspective: it is not politics that has driven American administrations in their approach to the Middle East and it is certainly not the so-called Israeli lobby that has shaped US foreign policy in the area. American Presidents are keenly aware of what it takes to sustain support for their policies and the closer one gets to presidential elections, the more electoral considerations will be taken into account on *all* issues. That is just as true for domestic policy as it is for foreign policy. It has been good politics to be a friend of Israel for the reasons noted above. But even here, I saw President Clinton, who was passionately committed to the Israeli relationship and to deep strategic cooperation with it, decide to take a step in 1996 that was bound to entail putting some pressure on an Israeli prime minister only two months before his November re-election date. At the time, there was escalating violence between Israelis and Palestinians that had been triggered after the Netanyahu government had acquiesced in a controversial decision by Ehud Olmert, then the Mayor of Jerusalem, to open a tunnel in the Old City. As Clinton's negotiator in the Middle East at the time, I told him that only by calling for a Summit and inviting King Hussein of Jordan, President Mubarak of Egypt, Prime Minister Netanyahu of Israel, and Chairman Yasser Arafat of the Palestinian Authority to the White House would we create an event with enough drama to give everyone a reason to pause and stop the violence—but Prime Minister Netanyahu would inevitably come under the pressure from all those in attendance to do something. All of Clinton's political advisors adamantly were opposed to his calling for the summit, but he went ahead and cast aside the political risks.¹

Truth be told, given Clinton's identification with Israel, and particularly the connections he forged with the Israeli public in two trips to Israel after the Rabin assassination and three months later when four bombs in nine days threatened to undermine the possibility of peace, it would have been difficult to portray him as soft on Israel. Still, some were tempted to try. More than anyone else, the Israelis have understood the importance of not making Israel a partisan issue in American politics and campaigns. The US relationship with Israel cannot be a Democratic or Republican issue but an American issue. And, in the Congress the bipartisan nature of support for Israel has been overwhelming.

During President Obama's first term, however, there was clearly an effort by some on the Republican side to exploit some of the tensions that emerged in the relationship between the Obama Administration and Israel over the settlement issue. Governor Mitt Romney when he was running for the presidency would later declare that President Obama had "thrown Israel under the bus." He certainly hoped to attract Jewish votes and money—and the disinformation about Obama's policy toward Israel seemed to know no bounds. Criticism of certain administration policies is one thing; trying to say the Democrats and the President were enemies of Israel was something else.

As someone who has worked for Republican and Democratic Presidents alike, and as someone who sees the importance of the US-Israeli relationship to our interests in the Middle East, I was very much against the effort to turn Israel into a political football. No genuine friend of Israel should want that. The fact that policy dictates have guided us in the Middle East will no doubt remain the case and they should. And, so, too, should our approach to Israel be guided by the national interests of the United States and not the narrow interests of those who seek short-term political gain—and whose concerns for Israel are more tactical than strategic.

Notes

1. Mubarak was the only one invited who did not come, perhaps doubting that Clinton would do what was necessary in the meeting given the timing.

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