

Israel Policy is Key to Defeating Islamic Extremists: A Coercive Solution to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

The Israeli-Palestine conflict is one of uniquely immense complexity and enormous international political significance. Basic fear of failure and myriad political risks have caused many US administrations to avoid efforts to resolve the conflict. Unfortunately, continuation of the historical US position on the issue makes continuation of the conflict a dangerous national security risk to the US. This paper will examine the conflict in light of US national security and propose that the current administration take a new approach to resolution in the interest of US national security. While Israeli/Palestinian leadership may not appear poised for an immediate solution, the present world situation is otherwise ripe for US action and should be quickly exploited before international dynamics shift to complicate resolution efforts. The United States has historically provided unprecedented support to the state of Israel, but now finds itself in a unique position to finally use this historical support to great advantage. This paper asserts that the US should utilize coercive diplomacy to force resolution of the conflict in a manner that generally favors the current Palestinian position. Four relevant factors will be addressed to support this assertion: 1) the US maintains incredible leverage over Israel, 2) the end of the Cold War eliminated any real US interests justifying the high levels of support to Israel, 3) resolution would greatly improve lagging US credibility and legitimacy internationally and particularly in the Muslim world, and 4) an updated US stance in the conflict is critical to success in the current fight against radical Islamists. Before a discussion of these relevant factors, it is necessary to roughly define what a “resolution that generally favors the current Palestinian position” would look like.

While this paper is unable to address the specifics of a proposed settlement, a brief, broad description of what an “acceptable” peace settlement would entail will frame the discussion. While many settlement details would require in-depth negotiation, the following basic tenets

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have been generally supported by the US, but rejected by Israel during in-depth negotiations. It is in these detailed portions of negotiations that coercive US diplomacy would be best applied to force Israeli agreement. The proposed “acceptable” peace settlement as described by many Middle East experts, including Stephen Walt and William Quandt, would include an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza based on pre-1967 borders,¹ withdrawal of Israeli settlements from the West Bank or land swap for settlements not transferred, and establishment of Jerusalem sectors as capitals of both states.² These Israeli concessions would come in return for full Palestinian recognition of Israeli statehood, Palestinian peace and security assurances, and Palestinian demilitarization.³ Having briefly addressed the basic framework of a proposed peace agreement, the first factor to discuss is the substantial leverage that the US maintains over Israel.

Throughout most of Israel’s existence the US has contributed significantly to the viability of the state. Besides large doses of immeasurable credibility and legitimacy bestowed over the years, the US has also provided significant financial support to Israel. The scope of this paper is insufficient to cover the full magnitude of this support, but to show the extent of US leverage, some of the most conspicuous examples will be provided. According to the Congressional Research Service, “Israel is the largest cumulative recipient of U.S. foreign assistance since WWII. From 1976-2004, Israel was the largest annual recipient of U.S. foreign assistance, having been recently supplanted by Iraq. Since 1985, the United States has provided nearly \$3B in grants annually to Israel.”⁴ This \$3B for 2008 represented 4.7% of Israel’s entire annual budget⁵ and roughly 2% of its gross domestic product (GDP).⁶ Conditions of financial and military aid to Israel are also provided with many advantages not generally offered to other aid recipients.⁷ Additionally, the 1985 free trade agreement with Israel eliminated virtually all tariffs

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between the countries.⁸ Considering the fact that the 2008 US trade deficit with Israel was \$7.8 billion,⁹ any threat to the free trade agreement or prospect of economic sanctions would likely provide a very strong influence upon the Israeli negotiation stance. Besides massive financial support, the US has also provided extensive diplomatic support that could be withheld to force settlement with the Palestinians.

The US' status in the UN has yielded some of the most obvious examples of US diplomatic support to Israel. "Between 1972 and 2006, Washington vetoed forty-two UN Security Council Resolutions that were critical of Israel. That number is greater than the combined total of all the vetoes cast by all other Security Council members for the same period and amounts to slightly more than half of all American vetoes during those years. There were also numerous resolutions focusing on Israel that never reached a vote... due to the threat of an American veto."¹⁰ Also, in spite of strident anti-nuclear proliferation efforts elsewhere in the world, the US has nonetheless successfully prevented the International Atomic Energy Agency from probing Israel's undeclared nuclear arsenal.¹¹ This history of massive diplomatic support and the specter of heightened international scrutiny represent immense weight available for the US to leverage against Israel.

While the US has made efforts to lead peace agreements in the past, it is clear that the significant leverage represented by their unparalleled economic support has not been used to coerce Israeli concurrence to an agreeable two-state solution. Though US aid has been sporadically delayed or withheld to discourage Israeli settlements in the West Bank,¹² no concerted effort has been made to withhold significant amounts of aid to force a permanent agreement. A major justification for this massive US support for Israel has been based on years of Cold War, power-balancing calculations.

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For the first forty years of Israel's existence, the on-going US support was largely justified by the need to balance the influence of the USSR in the region. As other regional states vacillated between the super powers, it was argued that continuous US support ensured that at least one Middle East state remained a solid and powerful ally in the US camp.¹³ While the overall strategic value of Israel to the US has been questionable, even throughout the Cold War,¹⁴ the close US alliance with Israel since the end of the Cold War has become more a liability than an asset.¹⁵ The US no longer vies for regional influence with an outside super power, but rather with the Middle East's own extreme Islamic ideology. Unfortunately, as Middle-East scholar, Chris Zambelis, appropriately claimed, "Despite the end of the Soviet threat, US relations toward the Middle East continue to be driven by Cold War calculations."¹⁶ A similar assessment is made that the often-cited "special relationship" with Israel has grown to a point that "protection of Israel" in and of itself has become a US interest.¹⁷ It is time for the US to adjust to the reality of the new threat and to shift focus and resources accordingly. The US can now wield the leverage built up over the course of the Cold War to force Israel to the peace table under terms that Israel has hitherto vehemently resisted.

An opposing view has argued that rather than a Soviet counter-balance, US support to Israel has acted more as a mitigating or softening force, preventing more reckless or dangerous behavior on Israel's part.¹⁸ This theory posits that to assure continued US backing, Israel moderates its behavior thereby stabilizing the region. It is true that, like the Palestinians and other desperately weakened groups, Israel has at times resorted to reckless behavior.¹⁹ In fact, Israel and its founding Zionists have embraced acts of terrorism and extreme aggression at various points in their past. Two eventual Prime Ministers (Begin and Shamir) led or were heavily involved in terror activity against the British in the 1940s²⁰ and against the Palestinians

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in 1948 when; “Zionist psychological warfare and terror tactics, which included the destruction of villages and the ousting of their populations combined to produce a state of panic that resulted in the flight of over 300,000 Arabs...”²¹ Because international integration has mitigated this behavior over the years, a return to this type of desperate behavior on the part of Israel is unlikely unless their very existence is threatened. A mere reduction of US aid and support would not threaten a collapse of Israel which could drive it toward such reckless behavior. However, the threat of a decline in financial or diplomatic aid and the implied reduction in moral support should be sufficient to bring Israel to peace talks with the expectation of significant land return on the table. In the absence of a Soviet threat, the US should focus on the current threats of terrorism and rogue states. In fact, a new US approach would likely increase international credibility, legitimacy and prestige to combat these now more pressing threats.

Israel’s status as the largest recipient of US foreign aid²² and continued US backing of Israeli positions in peace negotiations,²³ have made clear the near-limitless US support of Israeli interests. Unfortunately, the US may have elevated Israeli interests above its own. The greater US struggle for influence in the world, especially the Middle East, has been stymied by the amount and perceived blindness of its support of Israel. A 2003 Pew survey, that included traditional US allies, captured the fact that most of the world believes the US policy toward Israel is unfair to Palestinians. “In 20 of 21 populations surveyed – Americans are the only exception – pluralities or majorities believe the United States favors Israel over the Palestinians too much. This opinion is shared in Israel: 47% of Israelis believe the U.S. favors Israel too much, while 38% say the policy is fair and 11% think the U.S. favors the Palestinians too much.”²⁴ Given this and similar data points, such as European allies’ refusal to back the US in Operation IRAQI FREEDOM, many experts agree with the US Middle East negotiator, Aaron

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David Miller, that “the damage to our [US] national prestige and credibility inflicted by our invasion and conduct of the war in Iraq may have caused many Americans to forget that our uncritical identification with some of Israel’s policies and our inattention to the Arab-Israeli issue has the power to erode our influence and interests even more in a critically important region of the world.”²⁵ Considering the danger presented by Islamic views of the US position on Israel, this sentiment leads to the final argument for a new US approach.

Many experts agree that, “...the de facto US abandonment of its policy of acting as an ‘honest broker’ in the peace process, has created a seemingly permanent landscape that feeds a radicalizing (and anti-US) mass psychology...”²⁶ As evidenced by the two current US wars, this radicalized psychology represents the greatest current threat to US national security. The feeding of this radicalization in the absence of a discernable over-arching security threat should be reconsidered, in light of the Islamist global insurgency. The first requisite for a successful insurgency is a cause attractive enough to unite the population to support the insurgent.²⁷ The US position toward the Palestinians provides one such cause to the Islamic extremists who pull recruits from the population of the umma. It is increasingly clear that “the single issue that fuels the Global Islamist creed, as it does many other terrorist groups in the Middle East, is the Israel-Palestine issue.”²⁸ An understanding of the roots of Arab resistance was even expressed by Israel’s first Prime Minister, David Ben Gurion when he said, “If I were an Arab leader, I would never make terms with Israel. That is natural: we have taken their country. Sure, God promised it to us, but what does that matter to them?... They only see one thing: we have come here and stolen their country.”²⁹ By abandoning the history of lavish support of Israel, the US would remove this cause from Islamic terrorists, thereby denying them the recruiting base of more moderate Muslims who identify with the extremists regarding the unbalanced US position on

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Palestine. William Quandt summarized this view well when he asserted, “No doubt bin Laden’s motives for attacking the United States go well beyond a concern for the Palestinians. But certainly some of the passive support for Muslim extremism and some of the recruits who flock to al Qaeda must be understood to be a result of the Israeli-Palestinian crisis and the United States’ image as biased and hypocritical.”³⁰ The moral high ground and corresponding prestige increase US credibility and sway in the international community. The US sacrifices both by continually throwing its full weight behind a country that, in the absence of a peace agreement, looks increasingly to the rest of the world like an “imperial state.”³¹ “A genuine effort to establish an independent, sovereign, and viable Palestine... would go far to enhance American prestige in the Islamic world and dispel the claims of skeptics and extremists regarding Washington’s ultimate intentions.”³² While there may be many reasons for the ongoing support that drives Muslim radicalism, none save the questionable “Israel mitigation” logic previously discussed, have anything to do with national security.

Still, some may argue that any peace agreement that grants Palestinian statehood would be seen as terrorist appeasement. On the contrary, the proposed peace agreement would reward the moderates on both sides. It is true that extreme Islamist elements in the Palestinian community will likely never accept Israel’s right to exist.³³ However, extreme elements within Israel will also likely never accept any settlement that closes the door to all of “Eretz Israel” including all of the West Bank.³⁴ Additionally, in the absence of a peaceful option to support, the weak Palestinian population is left with violence as the only option to redress their grievances. Rather than focus on appeasing the outliers on either side of the argument, the US should adopt a solution that is most fair in the world view and increases US sway with the largest audience inside and outside of the Middle East.

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The Arab/Israel problem is not unsolvable, but few states possess the requisite leverage or motivation to bring about resolution. The US possesses not only the means to drive a solution to the conflict, but also more than ample national security reasons to do so. With the Soviet threat now replaced by the threat of radical Islam, the US should stop sacrificing much needed legitimacy for the continued lopsided support of a state that fulfills no overriding strategic US interest. Unfortunately, the perishable nature of the current situation presents a fleeting opportunity. The Obama administration should act quickly to apply the massive leverage at its disposal. The administration currently enjoys global admiration and support³⁵ that would allow the US to maintain and grow credibility with Western allies while drawing Middle East allies closer. Given that terrorism, including suicide bombings, are coercive tools,³⁶ the recent spate of major terror attacks outside of Iraq and Afghanistan would allay any claims that the US or Israel has succumbed to terrorist desires. Additional rationale for quick action is the growth of Israeli GDP in relation to US aid. As the Israeli economy grows, its financial dependence on the US will decrease, leading to diminished financial leverage. Israel's GDP is growing at a rate of 4-5%³⁷ while overall US aid is projected to remain largely steady³⁸. Therefore, the US loses economic leverage every year. The US is uniquely postured with massive leverage to force a solution that is far more balanced than any previously attempted. With quick action, the US can finally force an end to the conflict and strike a severe blow to the Islamic extremists who use the conflict to fuel their cause and threaten US security.

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Notes:

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