Americans Battle the Arab-Israeli Conflict

by Daniel Pipes

When, in the midst of the 2014 Hamas-Israel war, the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration briefly banned American carriers from flying to Israel, Sen. Ted Cruz (Republican of Texas) accused Barack Obama of using a federal regulatory agency “to launch an economic boycott on Israel, in order to try to force our ally to comply with his foreign-policy demands.”¹ In so doing, Cruz made an accusation no Israeli leader would dare express.

This is hardly unique: Over the years, other American political figures, both Republican (Dan Burton, Jesse Helms, Condoleezza Rice, Arlen Specter) and Democrat (Charles Schumer), have adopted tougher, and sometimes more Zionist, stances than the Israeli government. This pattern in turn points to a larger phenomenon: The Arab-Israeli conflict tends to generate more intense partisanship among Americans than among Middle Easterners. The latter may die from the conflict but the former experience it with greater passion.

More Anti-Israel than the Arabs

Americans who hate Israel can be more volubly anti-Zionist than Arabs. At a memorable Washington dinner party in November 1984, hosted by the Iraqi embassy for the visiting foreign minister Tariq Aziz, two tipsy American press grandees admonished and even insulted this emissary of Saddam Hussein for being insufficiently anti-Israel. Helen Thomas of United Press International complained that Iraq had not retaliated against Israel after the destruction of the Osirak nuclear reactor in 1981. She commented, “Just yellow, I guess.”

Similarly, in 1981, James E. Akins, a former U.S. ambassador to Saudi Arabia described as “more pro-Arab than the Arab officials,” chided Sheik Zaki Yamani, the Saudi oil minister, for rejecting the idea of linking Saudi oil production to U.S. policy toward Israel. In 1993, Edward Said of Columbia University castigated Palestine Liberation Organization leader Yasir Arafat for entering into the Oslo negotiating process. Meanwhile, Anthony B. Tirado Chase, an analyst of Said’s writings, found that “Said’s rejectionism speaks for few in the West Bank or Gaza.” In 2003, George Galloway, the British parliamentarian, incited Palestinians against Israel:

The Arabs are a great people. Islam is a great religion. But it has to, and they have to, stand up. … I asked somebody once, when [Ariel] Sharon was massacring the Palestinians in Jenin, why the huge demonstrations in the Arab countries didn’t continue? Why did they go away? They answered because a student was killed in Alexandria. I am very


4 Ibid.


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During the 2014 Hamas-Israel war, the Arab street remained largely calm.

Even more ironically, Abu Toameh found that many of the Arabs and Muslims on American campuses “were much more understanding and even welcomed my ‘even-handed analysis’ of the Israeli-Arab conflict.” Along the same lines, the historian Bernard Lewis notes that “Israelis traveling in the West often find it easier to establish a rapport with Arabs than with Arabophiles.”

Conversely, Lewis notes the viciousness of some Westerners residing in the Middle East:

Time and time again, European and American Jews traveling in Arab countries have observed that, despite the torrent of broadcast and published anti-Semitism, the only face-to-face experience of anti-Semitic hostility that they suffered during their travels was from compatriots, many of whom feel free, in what they imagine to be the more congenial atmosphere of the Arab world, to make anti-Semitic ... remarks that they would not make at home.

One symptom of this: The recent Hamas-Israel war prompted anti-Israel hate demonstrations, some violent, on the streets of many Western cities, while—with the exception of territories under Israeli control—the Arab street remained largely calm.

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10 Ibid.
More Zionist than the Israelis

Similarly, American supporters of Israel tend to stake out more ardently Zionist positions than do Israelis. In 1978, Richard Nixon complained that “the problem with the Israelis in Israel was not nearly as difficult as the Jewish community here.”11 In 1990, Israeli journalist Yossi Melman was surprised to find a Jewish audience in Texas taking a harder line against the Palestinians than he did himself; he responded with alarm when one young man asserted, referring to a fracas with the Israeli police that left nineteen Palestinians dead, “I do not feel sorry for those Palestinians who were killed. The Israeli police should have shot a thousand of them,” and no one in the audience took issue with him.

In 2000, Said complained that Zionist groups in the United States have views “in some way more extreme than even those of the Israeli Likud.”12 Also in 2000, when Israel’s prime minister offered unprecedented concessions on Jerusalem, Malcolm Hoenlein, vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, criticized his efforts “to take away or compromise Jewish sovereignty over the Temple Mount and turn it over to the jurisdiction of the United Nations or the Palestinian Authority.” Later, he warned, “all of us will have to answer to our children and grandchildren when they ask us why we did not do more to stop the giving away of Har haBayit [the Temple Mount].”13

Polling by the American Jewish Committee regularly finds American Jews more skeptical than their Israeli counterparts on the question of the efficacy of diplomacy with the Arabs.14 At the same time, for an American to be pro-Israel means liking all Israelis; starting with the American Israel Public Affairs Committee and Christians United for Israel, pro-Israel organizations offer unconditional support to Israel. Many American Jews go further: With neither their own lives nor those of their children at risk in the Israel Defense Forces, they do not publicly disagree with Israeli government decisions. By contrast, ranking Israelis repeatedly demand that Washington pressure their own government into taking steps against its wishes. Most famously, in 2007, David Landau, editor of Haaretz newspaper, told then-U.S. secretary of state Condoleezza Rice that Israel was a “failed state” and implored her to intervene on the grounds that Israel needs “to be raped.”15

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Explanations

Three reasons account for American partisans adopting stronger positions than their Middle Eastern counterparts:

*Pure passion*: Abu Toameh notes: “Many of the Palestinian Authority and Hamas officials … sound much more pragmatic than most of the anti-Israel, ‘pro-Palestinian’ folks on the campuses.” That is because they have real-life decisions to make with which they must live. Israelis and Arabs maintain a patchwork of relationships and daily life that softens the harshness of rhetoric. In contrast, pure passion tends to reign in the West. Most Israelis have contact with Arabs, something few American Zionists do. Similarly, a fair number of Egyptians, Jordanians, Lebanese, and other Arabs come into contact with Israelis. For Middle Easterners, the enemy is human; for Americans, the opponent consists of two-dimensional political adversaries.

This even applies to so monstrous a dictatorship as Saddam Hussein’s. As Barry Rubin commented about the experience of Tariq Aziz at dinner: “Perhaps it was easier to deal with the inner circles of Saddam’s regime, where fear bred discipline, than with these wild, unpredictable Americans.”

Two examples: Pro-Israel and anti-Israel Americans never need to cooperate on joint water supplies. Ismail Haniya, a prominent leader of the Hamas terrorist organization dedicated to Israel’s elimination, has three sisters who emigrated from Gaza to Israel, live as citizens there, and have children who served in the Israel Defense Forces.

*Solidarity*: Israelis argue mostly with other Israelis and Arabs with Arabs; but in the United States, pro-Israelis argue with anti-Israelis. Israelis and Arabs in the Middle East feel free to disagree with their own side more than do their U.S. partisans. When a left-wing Israeli criticizes the Netanyahu government’s policy, he disagrees with the Likud Party; when a left-wing American Jewish figure does the same, he attacks Israel. The former debates are within the framework of Israeli policymaking, the latter in the arena of American public opinion. Melman noted that “we Israelis have the luxury of expressing ourselves more frankly than many American Jews” and explained this by noting how “American Jews fear that their public criticism [of Israel] might be exploited by professional critics of Israel. Hence, most American Jews prefer to conceal their disagreements about Israel.” Mattityahu Peled, a left-wing Israeli gadfly, similarly observed that the pressure on Jews who hold dissenting views in the United States “is far

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greater than the pressure on us in Israel. … probably we in Israel enjoy a larger degree of tolerance than you here in the Jewish community.”18

Best-known policy issue: In the Middle East itself, other issues—civil wars in Syria and Iraq, the Saudi vs. Qatar vs. Iran rivalries, water problems—compete with the Arab-Israeli conflict for attention. But in the United States, the Arab-Israeli conflict is far better known than any other issue and thus dominates the discussion. As a result, the lines of debate are far more clearly etched: When the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) conquered Mosul in June 2014, no one knew what to do. But when Hamas launched rockets against Israel a month later, the facts and arguments were reassuringly familiar.

Conclusion

Arab-Israeli partisanship fits a broader pattern in which distance turns greys into blacks and whites, increasing political passions. In the case of the Contra war in Nicaragua, the journalist Stephen Schwartz writes that, on the one side, “Sandinistas often commented to me that they were put off to realize that their Democrat supporters in Washington employed a bloodthirsty rhetoric that would never have been heard in the towns of Central America.” When asked about this, a Sandinista explained: “We have to face death, and it makes us less willing to speak idly about it; but they enjoy talking about a death they will never risk or inflict on others.”19

The same reluctance applied on the other side, Schwartz found. A Contra supporter explained: “Our families are split by this conflict, and we do not feel the aggravated sense of rage displayed by foreigners about the war here. In fighting, we may have to kill, or be killed by, a relative with whom we grew up. It is not something that fills us with enthusiasm.”

In other wars where combatants live in close proximity to each other but their supporters do not, a similar pattern has emerged: Civil wars in Vietnam, Ireland, and Bosnia come immediately to mind. Commenting on the Spanish civil war, Trotsky observed that the rhetoric in London was far more extreme than the reality in Barcelona.

In conclusion, this pattern runs contrary to the general assumption that the frenzied combatants in a war need cool-headed outsiders to help guide them to resolution and peace—an assumption that sometimes leads to the unfortunate decision to put ignoramuses in charge of diplomacy and policy. In fact, the locals may see the problem more lucidly and realistically than their foreign friends. It is time for foreigners to stop assuming they know how to achieve the region’s salvation and instead to listen more to those directly involved.

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