

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.



Texas senator Ted Cruz meets with Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu in Israel, January 11, 2013. A week after taking office, Cruz traveled to Israel on a congressional delegation trip, led by Senate minority leader Mitch McConnell.

¹ Ted Cruz, “[Did President Obama Just Launch an Economic Boycott of Israel?](#)” Sen. Ted Cruz website, July 23, 2014.



Eulogizing Helen Thomas in 2013, al-Monitor referred to her as a “firm advocate of Palestinian rights.” At an Iraqi embassy dinner for the country’s foreign minister Tariq Aziz, she accused the regime of cowardice for not retaliating against Israel after the destruction of the Osirak nuclear reactor in 1981. She commented, “Just yellow, I guess.”

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 1981.² When Aziz tried brushing off her criticism, she scornfully accused the Iraqi regime of cowardice: “Just yellow, I guess.” Later the same evening, [Rowland Evans](#) of the syndicated Evans and Novak column, interrupted Aziz when he called the Iran-Iraq war the most important issue in the Middle East, shouting at him to tell Secretary of State

² Brent Baker, “[Tariq Aziz Too Soft on Israel for Helen Thomas](#),” Media Research Center, Apr. 29, 2001.

Shultz that the Arab-Israeli conflict was his main concern.³ The late [Barry Rubin](#), who was present, subsequently commented: “Unaccustomed to being attacked for excessive softness on Israel, Aziz looked astonished.”⁴

Similarly, in 1981, [James E. Akins](#), a former U.S. ambassador to Saudi Arabia [described](#) as “more pro-Arab than the Arab officials,”⁵ 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.”⁶ 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

³ Barry Rubin, “America’s Friend Saddam, 1988-90,” [Cauldron of Turmoil](#), p. 3.

⁴ [Ibid.](#)

⁵ Steven Emerson, *The American House of Saud* (New York: Franklin Watts, 1985), p. 250.

⁶ Anthony B. Tirado Chase, “[Edward Said’s Anti-Oslo Writings](#),” *Middle East Quarterly*, Mar. 1997.

sorry for the student and his family, but the Palestinians are losing their children every day, yet it doesn't stop them from coming out the next day. So it can be done. Hizbullah drove the enemy running from their country. Fares Uday, a 14-year-old boy, stood in front of an Israeli tank and attacked it with his hands. And when they killed him, his brother and his neighbors came in his place.⁷

In 2009, after a lecture tour of American universities, the Palestinian journalist [Khaled Abu Toameh](#) observed that

there is more sympathy for Hamas there than there is in Ramallah. ... Listening to some students and professors on these campuses, for a moment, I thought I was sitting opposite a Hamas spokesman or a would-be-suicide bomber. ... What struck me more than anything else was the fact that many of the people I met on the campuses supported Hamas and believed that it had the right to “resist the occupation” even if that meant blowing up children and women on a bus in downtown Jerusalem.⁸

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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.”⁹

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.¹⁰

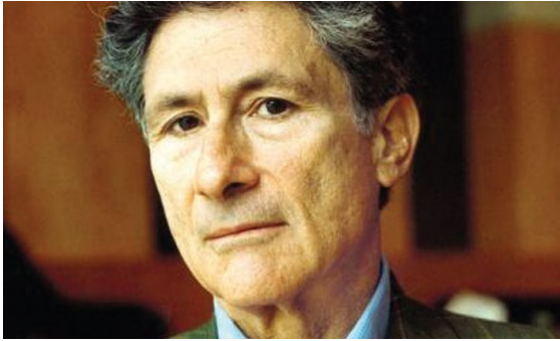
One symptom of this: The recent Hamas-Israel war prompted anti-Israel hate demonstrations, some violent, on the streets of many Western cities, while—with the exception of territories under Israeli control—the Arab street remained largely calm.

⁷ Douglas Davis, “[In the Service of Saddam](#),” *The Jerusalem Post*, Apr. 27, 2003.

⁸ Khaled Abu Toameh, “On Campus: The Pro-Palestinians’ Real Agenda,” Hudson Institute, New York, Mar. 24, 2009.

⁹ Bernard Lewis, [Semites and Anti-Semites: An Inquiry into Conflict and Prejudice](#) (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 1986), p. 257.

¹⁰ [Ibid.](#)



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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

11 Richard Milhaus Nixon, *The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1978), p. 787.

12 Edward Said, “[American Zionism](#): The Real Problem (1),” *al-Ahram Weekly* (Cairo), Sept. 21-27, 2000.

13 *YudelLine*, [Sept. 29, 2000](#); *Jewish Law Blog*, accessed [Feb. 17, 2015](#).

14 Yale M. Zussman, “[How Much Do American Jews Support the Peace Process?](#)” *Middle East Quarterly*, Dec. 1998, pp. 3-12.

15 Ezra HaLevi, “Haaretz Editor Asked US Secretary of State to ‘Rape’ Israel,” *Israel National News*, Dec. 27, 2007.

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



Three sisters of Hamas leader Ismail Haniya live in Tel Sheva, the first Bedouin town established in Israel in 1967. Some of their children have even served in the Israel Defense Forces. For Middle Easterners, the enemy is human; for Americans, the opponent consists of two-dimensional political adversaries.

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.”¹⁶ 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.¹⁷

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

¹⁶ Rubin, “America’s Friend Saddam, 1988-90,” [Cauldron of Turmoil](#), p. 3.

¹⁷ [The Telegraph](#) (London), [June 2, 2006](#).

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

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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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¹⁸ Mattityahu Peled, quoted in Paul Findley, *They Dare to Speak Out: People and Institutions Confront Israel’s Lobby* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press; 3rd ed., 2003), p. 285; *Middle East Policy*, June 1992, pp. 136–57.

¹⁹ Letter to the author, Mar. 24, 2009.