The United States in the Middle East The Evolution of Its Israeli Policy

written by Immanuel Wallerstein | March 9, 2009

In 2007, the United States has no foreign policy involvement greater and more significant than its military presence in Iraq. And in 2007, the United States has no closer ally and co-actor on the world scene than Israel. The relationship is arguably closer than the vaunted U.S.- British link. Neither an involvement of the United States in the Middle East nor the close links the United States has forged with Israel have always been the prevailing policy. On the contrary, both current realities are the outcome of a long and sinuous trajectory. We shall try to account for this evolution in terms of three different actors within the United States: the political elites, the American Jewish community, and the rest of the population. We shall then try to evaluate the likely evolution of this policy over the coming decades.

If we go back to the period before the Second World War, the story was quite different from what it is today. As late as the Second World War, the Middle East was off the radar screen for most Americans, except for an occasional look at exotica, such as Lowell Thomas's reportage on Lawrence of Arabia. This was a period in which the main outside actor in the Middle East was still Great Britain, which dominated most of it politically (formally and informally), the main exception being the two parts controlled by the French — today's Lebanon and Syria, and the three North African states. British firms controlled almost all of the oil produced there. The United States seemed to accept that the Middle East was a British zone of operation and primacy. Zionism was not a preoccupation of U.S. elites.

Insofar as the U.S. government had any policy there, it was largely that forged by State Department diplomats, who were for the most part Arabists and unsympathetic to Zionism. Here and there some politicians sympathized with the Zionist cause, but generally only in a very low-key way. And the non-Jewish population in the United States were totally ignorant of and indifferent to whatever was happening in the Middle East.

THE U.S. JEWISH POPULATION was split into four quite different groups. There were the German/Central European Jews, most of whose ancestors had immigrated in the middle of the nineteenth century. This group was by and large reasonably well off and assimilationist. They attended for the most part Reform synagogues, and their political expression was the American Jewish Committee. Most of them were anti-Zionist precisely because they were assimilationist.

The German Jews were only a small part of the population compared to the "Eastern" Jews who had come from Russia, Belorussia, Ukraine, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and other parts of eastern Europe after 1890 or so. Most of these Jews, as late as the Second World War, either were poor urban workers or ran small neighborhood businesses. This group split three ways in their attitudes.

One group were political radicals, involved in every variety of Marxist and socialist organization. They rejected religious affiliation. They concentrated their energy on fighting the class struggle. To most of them, Zionism was simply one more bourgeois nationalist project, which they rejected. A second group remained very Orthodox, rejecting assimilation, political radicalism, and Zionism equally (although there were some religious Zionists).

And the third group were the Zionists. We have no figures on how many they were, but they could

not have been more than a quarter of the U.S. Jewish population. They were politically weak, as demonstrated vividly by their inability to get the U.S. government just before and during the Second World War to open its frontiers generously to refugees from Hitler or to take other measures that would have been seen as helpful by the Zionists.

One last element must be included in this picture. Anti-Semitism was the dominant attitude among both the elites and the general population in the United States at this time. The United States still thought of itself as a White, Protestant country. Of course, anti-Semitism was matched by anti-Catholicism, and the even more virulent antagonism to those who were then called Negroes and Indians. Almost all members of these groups were basically low income workers.

The Second World War changed all of this. First of all, U.S. foreign policy changed. The United States decided to get direct access to oil in the Middle East. President Roosevelt's meeting with Ibn Saud in Cairo just a month before his death was the seal on a political alliance that has been a lasting reality ever since. After 1945, the British recognized that they no longer had the political and military power to maintain their role in the Middle East, and in effect passed the baton to the United States.

Secondly, the war ended with the realization that the Nazis had exterminated a large part of European Jewry, and that there were now large numbers of Jewish survivors who did not want to return to their countries of origin. Most wanted to go to the United States (or secondarily to Great Britain, Canada, and Australia). Some, not too many, wanted to go to Palestine. Since neither the United States nor the other preferred destinations were ready to absorb many of these refugees, Palestine as a destination seemed to Western policy-makers and to the refugees as an alternative worth exploring.

This meant among other things that the United States had to assume some responsibility for what would happen in Palestine when the British pulled out. What the United States and Great Britain agreed on became the 1947 United Nations resolution that offered independence to two states in a partitioned Palestine mandate. From the point of view of the United States, the partition accomplished three things simultaneously. It served as a response to pressure from Zionists for a Jewish state. It offered a solution to the so-called refugee problem (of Jews in Europe). And it increased the ability of the United States to take over British interests in Middle Eastern oil.

The Palestinian Arabs and the Arab independent states rejected the partition solution. When Israel declared independence on May 15, 1948, there was no corresponding declaration of independence in the zones designated by the United Nations for Palestinian Arab sovereignty. Instead, war between Israel and all the Arab states immediately broke out. Although the United States and the Soviet Union had competed for who would recognize the new Israeli state the first, only the United States reacted to the Israeli-Arab war by announcing an arms embargo. The Soviet Union, by contrast, furnished arms to the Israelis — directly, and via its east European satellites, particularly Czechoslovakia. This was a major factor in helping the Israelis to win the war and to absorb part of the territory that had been assigned to the Palestinian Arabs in the U.N. partition resolution. The remaining areas were occupied by Egypt and Jordan. No Palestinian Arab state was created.

In the years from 1948 to 1967, the attitudes of the American Jewish community slowly evolved. The Zionists presented the state of Israel as not only the historic resurrection of a Jewish state, but as an anti- colonial achievement and a model of democratic socialism, as incarnated in the kibbutzim. As a result of the war and of the postwar public relations presentation of the Israelis to American Jews, the opposition to Zionism by the assimilationists, the political radicals, and the Orthodox community diminished significantly, although it did not disappear entirely.

THERE WERE THREE OTHER CHANGES of some importance in this period that are relevant to this analysis. (1) This was a period of incredible economic expansion in the world-economy as a whole, concurrent with the assumption by the United States of the role of unquestioned hegemony in the world-system. (2) Politically and rhetorically, a so-called cold war started between the United States and the Soviet Union, marked by an intensive ideology of anti-Communism in the United States, one that became synonymous with patriotism. (3) There was a major transformation of the socio-economic status of American Jews.

The first and third changes were linked. Between the economic expansion and the G.I. Bill of Rights, large numbers of American Jews went to university and moved into middle-class roles in the social structure. (This was true of the main Catholic groups of European extraction as well.) By the late 1960s, there were few Jewish workers or Jewish poor left in the United States. This fact was fundamental to the shift of the three non-Zionist groups — the middle-class German Jewish assimilationists, the politically radical Jews, and the Orthodox community — in their attitudes towards Israel.

It helped that Israel was also shifting its internal politics. Soon after 1948, the Soviet Union more or less dropped Israel. Partly, this was due to Soviet concern with United States involvement in the Middle East and the sense that the Arabs might be more reliable and consequential allies than the Israelis. And partly, this was due to the sudden awareness that an Israeli state resonated with Soviet Jews, something that threatened the pattern of Soviet control over its citizenry.

Meanwhile, the Algerians launched their war of independence in 1954. The French searched for useful allies in combating this major attack on the French view of their country. They found one in Israel, which was ready to combat Arab nationalism anywhere. Israel, bereft of the Soviet Union and unsure about the United States, now turned to France as its major source of international support.

It was French arms that permitted Israel to join with France and Great Britain in the attack on Nasser's Egypt in 1956. And it was the United States that squashed this attack and forced the three countries to retreat. This of course only intensified the Franco-Israeli love affair, including decisive French assistance with the development by Israel of nuclear weapons. This relationship continued strongly until 1962, when the French conceded independence to Algeria. At that point, the French government decided that its main priority was restoring its links with the now independent North African states, and that links to Israel interfered seriously with that. The French government dropped Israel unceremoniously, just as the Soviet Union had done previously, and General De Gaulle made a famously anti-Semitic characterization of world Jewry "peuple d'élite, sûr de lui-même et dominateur."

The whole story changed in 1967 — within Israel, among the policy-making strata in the United States, and among American (and indeed other Western) Jews. The Israelis were nervous in 1967, perhaps unduly. But they saw a politically strong Nasser in Egypt hostile to them, and he seemed to be assembling Arab troops for an invasion. And the Israelis felt they had no certain outside guarantor. They decided on a pre-emptive strike against Egypt. Jordan joined the war, as did Syria. The Israelis were right about France. Although Israel enjoyed loud vocal support among French politicians and intellectuals, especially on the left, the French government embargoed arms to all sides.

In six days, the Israelis were nonetheless militarily victorious on all three fronts. When the cease-fire came, they controlled the whole of the British Mandated Palestine, undoing thereby the 1948 partition, to which they added territory beyond the area included in the mandate (Golan and Sinai). For most Israelis, this military victory consecrated the Zionist ideal. The Israeli government showed no serious intention of negotiating with anyone to return any part of the occupied territories.

Furthermore, the military victory served to make Israelis confident that they would be able to maintain this position indefinitely. To be sure, neither the de facto incorporation of the West Bank and Gaza nor the de jure annexation of East Jerusalem were formally recognized by the United Nations or the world's major powers. But over the succeeding forty years, Israeli governments pursued a policy of Jewish settlements designed to create realities "on the ground" that would encrust this expansion of Israel.

The American Jewish community was politically transformed. All doubts about the Zionist ideal seem to have vanished overnight. Resistance to the validity of Israel among assimilationists, political radicals, and almost all of the Orthodox virtually disappeared. Rather, American Jews now invested their pride in an Israel that had shown itself able to be a first-class military power. The socialization of American Jewish youth into a deep commitment to the survival and flourishing of Israel became a major focus of the synagogues and other Jewish organizations in the United States.

There also occurred a major shift in the ideological justification of Israel. The kibbutzim disappeared from the discourse — both because they were not thriving and because they were too "socialist." Two new themes were developed. One was the Holocaust, a subject little talked about before 1967. Making the Holocaust a central part of Jewish, and of non-Jewish, memory became a paramount effort of American Jews. The Holocaust was used both to justify whatever the Israeli government was doing in its policies towards the Arab populations and to argue that the United States (and other Western powers) were morally obligated to support Israel in its conflicts with the Arab world.

The second theme was "Israel, the outpost of democracy in the Middle East." The subtext of this theme was "Israel, the only reliable supporter of the United States in the Middle East." This was quite a contrast with the early days of Israel. For example, in 1949, Israel was one of the first countries to recognize the People's Republic of China. By 1967, such "leftist" expressions of foreign policy had totally disappeared. The emphasis was now on the degree to which Israel adhered to Western values and alliances. It was after 1967 that the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), which calls itself "America's Pro-Israel Lobby," became a major force in American politics, with a strong influence both in Congress and within the Executive branch of government.

Furthermore, the victory in 1967 not only profoundly affected U.S. policy-makers but had a big impact on U.S. non-Jewish public opinion. The United States was in the midst of the Vietnam war, which was not going as well as it had hoped, with growing opposition to U.S. policy both in western Europe and among Americans at home. Israel as reliable friend in the Middle East seemed a rare positive element in a difficult global situation.

THE GENERAL NON-JEWISH POPULATION was impressed by an Israel that seemed virile and pro-Western. Old stereotypes were falling away. The decline of anti-Semitism — largely a victory of democratic forces within the United States — seemed to induce people to believe that they should be favorable to Israel. This was a position vociferously argued by American Jewish organizations, which tended to equate anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism. Even among the student protestors of 1968, who were by and large "Third- worldist" in their sympathies, there was little overt support for the Palestinians. The absence of a visible Palestinian movement conducting rambunctious demonstrations within Israel perhaps contributed to this lack of verbalized sympathy.

In 1967, the United Nations Security Council passed unanimously its famous Resolution 242. The exact meaning of the resolution has been subject to an endless debate ever since, but essentially it was the clarion call for what came to be called the "land for peace" solution — Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories in return for recognition of the state of Israel by the Arab countries. It has never been implemented. It was not clear in 1967 whether or not Israel was ready to implement it. But it is surely clear that, at that point in time, they did not envisage the establishment of an

independent state of Palestine. Political discussion in Israel centered around the possible reincorporation of part of the West Bank into Jordan. The then Israeli Prime Minister, Golda Meir, opined that there was no Palestinian people.

The so-called Yom Kippur war of 1973 (also called the Ramadan War and the October War) was intended to undo the de facto consequences of the 1967 war. It did not succeed in doing this. The Arab military forces did well initially. The Israelis nonetheless won militarily again on all fronts. This time, however, the United States furnished significant armaments during the war. Israel had now found its third international guarantor.

The Yom Kippur war was followed almost immediately by the oil price rise of OPEC. This was interpreted as a major thrust by the oil-producing countries against the West. However, it should be noted that the two leading and crucial exponents of this oil price rise were Iran (then under the Shah) and Saudi Arabia, the two strongest allies of the United States (other than Israel) in the region. A long-term analysis of the OPEC decision shows that it helped the United States to secure its position in the region and to weaken the position of western Europe and Japan in the world economy. By 1978, the United States was able to mediate the so-called Camp David accords, which resulted in a formal peace treaty between Egypt and Israel, the return of the Sinai to Egypt, as well as mutual diplomatic recognition.

When Reagan became president of the United States in 1981, one of the factors that made his election possible was the emergence of a new group that we now call the Christian right. These were Protestant Evangelical voters, largely in rural areas, who were persuaded to desist from their previous electoral abstentionism and begin an effort to take over the Republican Party in order to center its attention on so-called social issues (such as the fight against abortion and later against homosexuality). This group, as we know, was very successful politically, reaching an apogee during the presidency of George W. Bush.

The Christian right generally espoused a position in favor of a strong military and unilateral assertiveness by the United States in the world arena. They turned a particular attention to the Middle East and especially to Israel. They espoused a theological position that the Second Coming of Christ required the establishment of a Jewish state in the entire territory of Biblical Palestine. They became more militantly Zionist than the Israeli government itself. Of course, the theological justification included the belief that, when Christ returned to earth, all Jews would have to choose between adopting Christ as their savior or being eternally damned. No matter. For Israel, for the first time, now had a powerful supporter among the non-Jewish American population.

In 1987, Palestinians inside the occupied territories launched the first so-called intifada. It lasted six years, and profoundly changed the politics of Israel and of the Middle East. For one thing, it showed that there could be serious political resistance by the Arab population within Israel and the Occupied Territories. In the second place, it focused world attention, more or less for the first time, on the misdeeds of Israeli policies vis-á-vis the Palestinians. The Israeli David now began to be seen by many people as the Israeli Goliath.

THERE WERE TWO PRINCIPAL consequences of the intifada. On the one hand, the U.S. government, during the presidency of George H.W. Bush, pushed the Israelis towards negotiations with the PLO and with Yasser Arafat. The outcome was the Oslo accords. This was followed by the negotiations sponsored by President Clinton, reaching their climax (and non-culmination) in the meetings in Taba in January 2001. One may say that these accords and these negotiations were in the end a failure. But what they did accomplish was the first serious recognition by the world community of an independent Palestine as a concept.

The second consequence was a shift in the moral evaluations of the world community concerning the Israeli- Palestinian conflict. Whereas, up to the intifada, one could say that most persons in the United States and in other Western countries basically sympathized with Israel, now there began to be many who basically sympathized with the Palestinians. It has been a rolling stone that has gathered no moss. Each year, the percentage sympathizing more with the Palestinians has grown.

The situation changed again drastically with the coming to power of George W. Bush in 2001. The key element of Bush's policy was the decision to invade Iraq in 2003. It is not hard to demonstrate that this was the "chronicle of a death foretold." The neo-cons working with the militarists had pre-announced this war in 1997, long before the events of 9/11, which provided the political excuse for the invasion. The Bush policy was seen as the mode of reasserting unquestioned U.S. hegemony in the world-system.

Among the side effects of this policy was intended to be further support to and guarantees of Israeli interests. It was so interpreted by the Israeli government which enthusiastically endorsed the whole adventure. The Bush regime went much further in its support of Israeli objectives than any previous U.S. government had done, endorsing in effect the idea that the Jewish settlements in the occupied territories were to be considered realities on the ground and only marginally scaled back in any final settlement. When the Israelis in 2006 decided to invade Lebanon in order to destroy Hezbollah, they had the total support of the U.S. government.

The trouble with such a close alliance is always that a setback to one is a setback to the other. The fiasco of U.S. policy in Iraq redounded on the Israelis as well. And the failure of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon redounded on the United States in turn. The crunch began, and both the U.S. elites and the Israelis now faced painful reassessments of what they could possibly do.

It was just at this point that Israel's Prime Minister, Ehud Olmert, addressed the 35th World Zionist Congress on June 26, 2006, reaffirming a historic Zionist position concerning the diaspora. He said that "every Jew in the world must come to Israel in order that the Jewish question be finally resolved." This was scarcely a message that most American Jews, however Zionist, wanted to hear, or had any intention to heed.

WHAT CAN WE PROJECT AHEAD? Israel has counted on the existence of an international guarantor — partly to give political and economic support, but crucially to give military support. As we have argued, this was first, for a brief but crucial period, the Soviet Union. Then it was, for a somewhat longer period, France. And at least since 1967 it has been the United States. Geopolitically, it is hard to see how Israel could have survived without this support. So, the question for Israel is whether they can in fact count on continued U.S. total (or near-total) support. I doubt it, for three reasons.

The first reason is the objective reality of U.S. geopolitical decline, which is well under way. Its decline as a hegemonic power began in 1970 or thereabouts. What had been a slow decline turned into a precipitate decline as a result of the total geopolitical folly of the Bush regime's attempt to recover the global status of the U.S. by a policy of unilateral macho militarism. U.S. decline is now irrecuperable — economically, politically, culturally, and even militarily. In the coming decades, this reality will be visible to everyone. It already is to informed elites everywhere.

The second reason is how we may expect the United States to react to this dethroning. The likelihood is that both the elites and the general population will take it hard and find it difficult to cope, at least at first. A very sophisticated reaction would be to realize that erstwhile hegemonic powers have not suffered that much in their declining years. They have lived off their accumulated fat, provided they have adjusted to new realities. But others will want to withdraw into their shell, a new version of historic isolationism. And many will want to find scapegoats. Neither U.S.

isolationism nor the search for scapegoats would bode well for Israel.

The third reason is that anti-Semitism (of the classic variety) is not dead in the United States. It has merely been pushed underground to a place where "decent" people stopped speaking of it, even to themselves — an analysis that Olmert's speech in 2006 seemed implicitly to endorse. When groups are in trouble, however, old demons often reemerge. We have seen this recently when the collapse of the Communisms was followed by the reemergence of multiple xenophobic manifestations in all those countries. This is something that could very well occur in the United States. It is not at all clear what the Christian Zionists would do or feel in such a situation.

All three realities might lead to a reassessment of Zionism by the American Jewish community. Some would become more Zionist, in the sense that a revived anti-Semitism would be proof of the need for Israel as the ultimate refuge. They might even emigrate to Israel. But others would move in the opposite direction. And the American Jewish community, which is still left of center politically, might ultimately bend in part to the shifting assessments of the world's left-of-center evaluations. Indeed, this shift has already begun.

Meanwhile, in Israel, the glories of the 1967 war might fade for the younger generations in the light of the new geopolitical realities. If Israel lost the United States as its international guarantor, where could it find a replacement? There is only one plausible replacement, and one that is not under consideration at the moment. The only possible replacement would be an independent state of Palestine, but only one that was considered legitimate by the overwhelming majority of the Palestinians. It therefore would have to be one that included Hamas and similar movements.

COULD THIS BE ACHIEVED? It seems very difficult at the moment. Neither Israelis nor Palestinians seem at the moment attuned to this idea, and pessimism is the order of the day, on both sides. Yet, we know by looking at history that deep and murderous struggles between peoples have been healed — not quite miraculously, but politically, after a long effort and much exhaustion. Of course not all such historic conflicts have had a reasonable ending. Some have resulted in less pleasant consequences. Neither I nor anyone else can predict what kind of outcome will be achieved in this case. What one can say clearly is that the U.S.-Israeli total clinging one to the other is coming to an inevitable end. Israel in a sense is on its own now.

Footnotes