

Westview Special Studies on the Middle East 

The United States and Israel

Domestic Determinants
of a Changing U.S. Commitment

Nimrod Novik

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Introduction

A. Background

An astute observer once characterized US-Israel relations as the manifestation of the "gevalt syndrome:" "On any day, one has the impression that (a) the sky is falling down on both states; (b) it will fall down tomorrow; or (c) it fell down yesterday but both governments are too stupid to understand it."¹ This observation seems to fit the early and mid-1980s, as Washington's involvement in the Middle East and Israeli dependence on the United States have entered a new phase.

In the US, the "Vietnam syndrome," a metaphor representing American reluctance to conduct active foreign and security policies in remote areas of the globe, has gradually been giving way to a renewed awareness of the need to actively – even unilaterally – protect western interests against regional and extra-regional challenges. The "Watergate syndrome," which stripped the American presidency of much of the ability to conduct policy by increasing congressional involvement in operational details, seems to have become somewhat muted, although it has not been replaced by a new era of bi-partisanship. Finally, the "Chilean syndrome," which damaged the CIA as an effective arm of US foreign and security policies, has diminished in intensity, allowing the revival of the agency whose effective functioning is so crucial in a complex area like the Middle East.

This phase in Washington's approach to questions of national security comes in the wake of an intensive period of American involvement – implying renewed willingness to undertake expanded commitments – in the Middle East. Interestingly, this was the doing of the Carter administration, which in itself was largely a product of the domestic impact of the Vietnam War and the Watergate Affair. The "Camp David style" of diplomacy – characterized by unprecedented presidential involvement – resulted in increased American commitments to Israel and Egypt, and was rewarded by both the initial Accords and, ultimately, the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty.

Concurrently, however, a sequence of events in the Middle East region and its periphery put US tolerance to the test. These included: the Soviet airlift of Cuban troops and the expanded role

of Soviet advisers in determining the outcome of the Ogaden War between Somalia and Ethiopia (coming, as it were, after a similar exercise in injecting Soviet/Cuban power into another Third World country – Angola – where it was able to determine the outcome of the Civil War); Soviet involvement in the domestic affairs of the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY, or South Yemen) and that country's emergence as a major Soviet base on the border of Saudi Arabia; the related – if brief – opening to Moscow in the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR, or North Yemen); the Iranian revolution and the capture of the American Embassy in Tehran; the occupation of the Grand Mosque in Mecca which, coupled with unrest in Saudi Arabia's oil-rich eastern province and with signs of radicalization in several other oil-producing Arab states, demonstrated the potential for instability; the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan; and the Iran-Iraq war.

While even political opponents praised the Carter administration's success on the Egyptian-Israeli front as an achievement of historical importance, its record on these other challenges was far more controversial and was received with far less enthusiasm.

Thus, in the US the awareness of the need to adopt more effective responses to such developments was shared by many. Yet various schools of thought debated the necessary and appropriate remedies. The role of America's friends and allies in sharing the burden of protecting American/western interests in the Persian Gulf-Middle East region has emerged as an important element of the desired formula. One component of it – though hardly the most salient – has been the role to be played by the State of Israel in any suggested scheme for US policy in the Middle East. Views on this issue have ranged along a broad spectrum: from one extreme, where Israel is considered the essential stabilizing center of any framework envisioned for regional security – to the other extreme, where lowering the profile of US-Israel relations and forcing Israeli concessions within the context of the Arab-Israel conflict are perceived as prerequisites and, to some, even as substitutes for an effective formula.

Still, in the mid-1980s, while this debate has yet to be settled, Israel ranks high among US friends and allies as measured by most indices of affinity used in the study of international relations (trade, aid, tourism, cultural exchanges, media coverage, official visits and statements, etc.). Moreover, throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s, Israel has been shielded from potentially damaging

American initiatives by two major actors: the American public and the US Congress. Israel's popularity with both has long served as a deterrent and a barrier against tendencies to pressure and/or punish it, whenever Jerusalem's conduct was judged by the executive branch to be running counter to the US (or Israel's own) national interest. Moreover, the broad support for Israel among the American electorate encouraged legislators repeatedly to use their power of the purse in Israel's favor.

With the inauguration of the Reagan administration these two dams appeared as solid and reliable as ever. Indeed, as Ronald Reagan entered the White House, many observers concluded that the combination of the most sympathetic American president since Israel's independence on the one hand, and an American Congress and public united in their support for Israel on the other, was a guaranteed prescription for four, perhaps eight, years of harmony in US-Israel relations.

Yet, midway through the Reagan administration's first term in office, in the wake of the war in Lebanon (and in an apparent confirmation of the gevalt syndrome), the same observers seemed united in predicting that a serious confrontation between Washington and Jerusalem was inevitable. The administration, they claimed, was convinced that Israel was undermining chances for peace and other US interests in the Middle East. Congress, too, seemed hostile, and was expected to punish Israel by cutting aid. The American public was not expected to object to such measures, as Jerusalem's image was being transformed from that of a peace-loving David to a ruthless Goliath. A proven formula for disaster seemed to be unfolding.

However, within but a few months "strategic cooperation" had replaced "suspicion and hostility" as the more frequently used terms in characterizing US-Israel relations. Even earlier, Congress again raised levels of aid to Israel, while expressions of public sympathy with Israel seemed to reflect the pre-Lebanon war mood. The dams appeared to have survived yet another – most testing – crisis.

This crucial demonstration of the durability of the more basic determinants of US policy vis-à-vis Israel seems to overshadow an equally important – yet rarely recognized – feature of the relationship: changing realities on the American domestic arena have already transformed the basis of the American commitment; they threaten to undermine both dams as well.

B. Thesis

It is the objective of this study to demonstrate that the current phase of the debate over Israel's role in US foreign and security policies is being held at a time when simultaneous changes threaten to alter some of the primary domestic determinants of these policies. These processes of change, if they continue as suggested below, may converge to produce a new setting for the formulation of American Middle East policies – a setting far less compatible with basic Israeli political, economic and security needs.

It is also the contention of this study that while some of these changes will progress independently of developments in the Arab-Israel arena, others are, and will continue to be, affected by perceptions of the conduct of Middle East countries.

Consequently, this study represents an attempt to map and analyze the changing domestic setting for the formulation of American policies that affect Israeli security and well-being. It also seeks to point out the policy-consequences of these changes. The analysis thus focuses on trends and developments in those components of the American domestic arena which are judged to be most relevant to the formulation of these policies.

The first variable addressed is the oft discussed but rarely defined "turn to the Right" in American politics. Identified – for the purposes of this study – in terms relevant to US foreign and security policies, this means greater support for assertiveness both among the public-at-large and in Congress. This is manifested in a general willingness to finance the development of instruments of military power – a major departure from the post-Vietnam era. Yet, the imprint of Vietnam can be readily discernible in another characteristic: considerable restraint in support for the actual use of American forces. The new assertiveness also features a lower threshold of tolerance toward perceived violations of American interests by friend and foe alike. Consequently, this American mood, defined below as Selective Interventionism, entails both the will, however limited, to become involved, and the determination not to be pushed around. As demonstrated below, Israel is excluded neither from the supportive trend of greater involvement nor from the other, punitive, manifestation of lesser tolerance. Indeed, as suggested throughout, Israel's own conduct affects the balance between the two.

The second variable is in evidence most clearly in Congress; by definition, however, it characterizes the general public as well. It is the gradual fading of a major ingredient of the earlier American commitment to Israel – the moral debt to the victims of the Holocaust. With the ascent of a generation which either did not reach political maturity during that period or wishes to leave those memories behind, the weight of the historical-moral commitment in determining American policies vis-à-vis Israel has been diminishing. Concurrently, the weight of contemporary moral judgment as well as of more practical considerations has increased. With regard to the former consideration, Israel's image as an admired social experiment has been tarnished by public sentiment toward, and media portrayal of, the less attractive dimensions of Israeli domestic and, more clearly, security policies. Consequently, the latter consideration – translated into perceptions of the balance between the cost of supporting Israeli security needs on the one hand and Israel's utility and contribution to US interests on the other – has gained some importance in determining relevant American policies.

The third major relevant variable affecting the domestic setting concerns difficulties of the American economy, particularly inasmuch as they shape the two dimensions of US economic strength that affect Israel's security: (1) the revitalization of US conventional military capabilities; and (2) the American foreign aid program. On both counts, this study suggests the possibility of hard times ahead.

Lastly, the study addresses the political manifestations of the "decade of OAPEC."² Mounting evidence of its ineffectiveness notwithstanding, perceptions of the continued potency of the oil weapon still served, until recently, as a prism through which many Americans perceived Middle East political developments. Yet, even the emerging recognition of a possible evaporation of OAPEC's ability to carry out oil blackmail pales against the growing evidence of the political potency of petrodollars in influencing American political behavior. One manifestation of this new reality has been the emergence of strong competition to the once exclusively influential Middle East Washington lobby – the pro-Israel one.

In sum, this study deals with four major variables affecting the domestic setting for the formulation of US foreign/security policies. The Middle East manifestations of two of them will be

affected by Israel's conduct during the months and years ahead. These are (1) American resolve to protect US (and other western) interests abroad – where decisions made in Jerusalem serve as important inputs to the determination of Israel's role as either a helpful ally or an *enfant terrible*; and (2) the changing of the guard in American politics, as the new generation attaches greater weight to Israel's present image and its strategic contribution than to its historical legacy. In this context, the unique role of the American-Jewish community is emphasized.

A third and fourth major variable affect Israel's well-being with equal vigor, yet Jerusalem has little relevancy to their unfolding: (3) the rates of growth, unemployment and inflation in the US and their influence on America's defense budget and foreign aid programs; and (4) the changing global oil market and its impact on OAPEC-US relations.

C. Rationale

The selection of variables stems from several assumptions about the relevancy of specific components of the American political system to the formulation of US foreign and defense policies, particularly with respect to Israeli security and well-being. An attempt to quantify the respective weights of these components within the process is beyond the scope of this study. Moreover, any suggestion of an order of priority among them may be misleading, and may even defeat the purpose of pointing out the centrality of each variable to the formulation of specific dimensions of these policies.

In attempting to focus on the more basic, long-term determinants of the relevant American policies, this study avoids a discussion of the role played by the executive branch. Changing ideological orientations as well as policy objectives, priorities and decisionmaking styles from one administration to another render this variable less predictable within time frames that exceed a single presidential term in office. Clearly, the executive branch is the primary initiator and executor of US foreign and defense policies. The quality and efficiency of these policies are affected by several intra-administration characteristics, including limitations on innovative, independent and responsive decisionmaking, as well as hindrances to implementation stemming from the tendency toward incrementalism, parochial organizational pre-

ferences, bureaucratic infighting and "grooved" behavior confined to standard operational procedures (SOPs).³ Yet, those limitations do not overshadow the administration's advantages over other centers of power in the American political system. The administration enjoys the benefit of the accumulated expertise of foreign and defense career officials; it has an exclusive routine access to classified information and, most important, it is better organized for both decisionmaking and implementation.⁴

This is the case when compared with the other major contender: the US Congress.⁵ Characterized by parochialism, localism, relative thinness of expertise and personnel, restricted access to classified information, and defused authority, Congress has had limited success in its competition with the executive branch over the daily management of foreign and defense policies. Consequently, these areas have traditionally been the domain of the executive branch.⁶ Yet, in the post-Vietnam era, Congress has become more aggressive and self-assertive on many areas of foreign policy which in themselves appear to be peripheral, but which collectively constitute a major portion of US foreign policy. Although Congress cannot and does not impose a coherence of its own, it does restrain, modify and supplement certain executive branch policies.⁷ Most noticeably, these include "economic aid policy, military assistance...and the location of facilities,"⁸ as well as elements of the defense budget.⁹ Both economic and military assistance constitute major instruments of US policy vis-à-vis Israel. Along with the questions of military facilities and with relevant components of the defense budget, they comprise much of the United States' broader Middle East policy.

Congress' utilization of these very instruments in trying to influence foreign and security policies, makes the American legislature particularly relevant to issues affecting Israeli security. Consequently, changes in Congress that shape its attitude toward Israel's foreign and security concerns warrant careful examination; they may either enhance, or impose further limitations on, the freedom of the executive branch to formulate policies that affect Israel.

Increased attention by representatives and senators alike to the wishes and desires of their respective constituencies, at the expense of congressional leadership and administration preferences,¹⁰ has accentuated the legislators' role as "a barometer of public opinion."¹¹ However, supportive public opinion may be a

significant asset not only to leadership with a local constituency, but to nationally-elected officials as well. Indeed, public support has long been recognized as a major component of a president's "stock of persuasive resources."¹² As a noted scholar/practitioner observed:

Even the most tough-minded practitioner of real-politik would acknowledge that perceptions of national interests and values are shaped by public opinion....it does provide the immediate context for decisions, it sets some of the rules of the game, and it defines in large measure who will be responsible for the decisions made.... As revealed in countless surveys and polls, ...and as played out in electoral contests, American public opinion does influence foreign policy, but often in very indirect ways.¹³

Traditionally, and in a noticeable exception to the rule,¹⁴ American public opinion concerning the Arab-Israel conflict has been relatively stable, with changes occurring along consistent, long-term patterns. Indeed, as demonstrated by reactions to the war in Lebanon, erratic zigzags are both rare and short-lived. Yet their incremental attritional effect on the more stable trends can and should be assessed.¹⁵ Thus, the study of both long-term trends and short-term developments in US public attitudes offers important insights into future courses that define "boundaries beyond which no American administration will step."¹⁶ This point is also made by William Schneider and Seymour Martin Lipset: "Israel is fervently backed by a politically potent minority (one we estimated as about 25 percent), including a large number of non-Jews, who are prepared to punish at the ballot box those who seek to undermine the unique American-Israel relationship." This group, they argue, is "the only 'veto group' in the American electorate [that is] concerned with the Middle East...."¹⁷

In studying relevant dimensions of US public opinion, extensive use is made of public opinion polls. Warnings against the uncritical reading of public opinion surveys are common and appropriate. Respondents may often be influenced by such intervening variables as question wording, temporary saliency of an issue, expressed views of opinionmakers, and the like. Nevertheless, survey data can be useful in identifying long-term trends and changes over time, particularly when comparably-constructed samples and comparable question wordings are available.

Having discussed components of the human environment in

terms of public and congressional attitudes (as well as the environmental variables that help shape them), the study turns to two specific components of this environment: the American Jewish community and the Evangelical Right. Support for Israel appears to be the only mutually agreeable item on the political agenda of these strange bed-fellows. In contrast with American Jewry, with its consistent political potency and persistently pro-Israel stand, the Evangelical Right appears far less significant politically than some Israeli leaders tend to suggest. Indeed, it is the fascination of these leaders with their assumed new source of political support, rather than any objective measure of its actual relevancy, that prompted this author to offer an analysis of the phenomenon. This brief analysis focuses primarily on the most visible pro-Israel advocate within the Evangelical Right, the Moral Majority's Reverend Jerry Falwell.

Several other actors on the American political arena, with historical or potential relevance to US Middle East policies, are not discussed in this study. This is due to their relatively limited weight as either constraints on, or sources of support for, the relevant American policies during the period under discussion. These include the community of Americans of Arab descent. Their general apathy¹⁸ and low level of political mobilization (under 3% of the 2.5 million Arab American population are politically organized; less than 30% are registered to vote¹⁹), intra-community divisions on questions related to the Middle East, and failure to master contemporary techniques of interest-articulation and coalition-formation, render the community ineffective. Also, the American Black population – although showing early signs of greater involvement, and in conflict with the American Jewish community over various components of the domestic agenda – has yet to reach political maturity and to assign the Middle East high priority on its list of political objectives.²⁰ Similarly, such traditional sources of support for Israel as the American labor unions seem to be losing some of their potency, as elite political orientations no longer determine or reflect accurately grass roots political behavior.

Two non-human components of the "operational environment"²¹ affect the boundaries of presidential decisionmaking and administration conduct in areas central to the present study. First, the magnitude, relative novelty, and political relevancy to American Middle East policies of the petrodollars phenomenon make this

factor particularly worthy of examination. Second, the state of the American economy is relevant in shaping investments in US strategic and general purpose forces. These in turn affect: (1) perceptions of American deterrence capabilities in global as well as Middle East regional contexts; (2) US efforts to shed the image of unreliability and impotence, considered a major hindrance to more intimate collaboration with various states in the Middle East/Persian Gulf region; (3) Washington's ability to provide Israel with its future requirements in weapons systems, ammunition and high technologies; and (4) US capabilities to resupply Israel in an emergency.²² More obvious, economic realities in the US should be addressed as they affect public, congressional and administration willingness and ability to appropriate funds for foreign aid programs.

Following the examination of the various dimensions of these four major components of the American domestic setting, the final section summarizes their policy implications and relevance to Israel's security and well-being in the middle and late 1980s.