

## *Why the U.S. Supports Israel*

By Stephen Zunes

In the United States and around the world, many are questioning why, despite some mild rebukes, Washington has maintained its large-scale military, financial, and diplomatic support for the Israeli occupation in the face of unprecedented violations of international law and human rights standards by Israeli occupation forces. Why is there such strong bipartisan support for Israel's right-wing prime minister Ariel Sharon's policies in the occupied Palestinian territories?

The close relationship between the U.S. and Israel has been one of the most salient features in U.S. foreign policy for nearly three and a half decades. The well over \$3 billion in military and economic aid sent annually to Israel by Washington is rarely questioned in Congress, even by liberals who normally challenge U.S. aid to governments that engage in widespread violations of human rights—or by conservatives who usually oppose foreign aid in general. Virtually all Western countries share the United States' strong support for Israel's legitimate right to exist in peace and security, yet these same nations have refused to provide arms and aid while the occupation of lands seized in the 1967 war continues. None come close to offering the level of diplomatic support provided by Washington—with the United States often standing alone with Israel at the United Nations and other international forums when objections are raised over ongoing Israeli violations of international law and related concerns.

Although U.S. backing of successive Israeli governments, like most foreign policy decisions, is often rationalized on moral grounds, there is little evidence that moral imperatives play more of a determining role in guiding U.S. policy in the Middle East than in any other part of the world. Most Americans do share a moral commitment to Israel's survival as a Jewish state, but this would not account for the level of financial, military, and diplomatic support provided. American aid to Israel goes well beyond protect-

ing Israel's security needs within its internationally recognized borders. U.S. assistance includes support for policies in militarily occupied territories that often violate well-established legal and ethical standards of international behavior.

Were Israel's security interests paramount in the eyes of American policymakers, U.S. aid to Israel would have been highest in the early years of the existence of the Jewish state, when its democratic institutions were strongest and its strategic situation most vulnerable, and would have declined as its military power grew dramatically and its repression against Palestinians in the occupied territories increased. Instead, the trend has been in just the opposite direction: major U.S. military and economic aid did not begin until after the 1967 war. Indeed, 99% of U.S. military assistance to Israel since its establishment came only after Israel proved itself to be far stronger than any combination of Arab armies and after Israeli occupation forces became the rulers of a large Palestinian population.

Similarly, U.S. aid to Israel is higher now than twenty-five years ago. This was at a time when Egypt's massive and well-equipped armed forces threatened war; today, Israel has a longstanding peace treaty with Egypt and a large demilitarized and internationally monitored buffer zone keeping its army at a distance. At that time, Syria's military was expanding rapidly with advanced Soviet weaponry; today, Syria has made clear its willingness to live in peace with Israel in return for the occupied Golan Heights—and Syria's military capabilities have been declining, weakened by the collapse of its Soviet patron.

Also in the mid-1970s, Jordan still claimed the West Bank and stationed large numbers of troops along its lengthy border and the demarcation line with Israel; today, Jordan has signed a peace treaty and has established fully normalized relations. At that time, Iraq was embarking upon its vast program of militarization.

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Iraq's armed forces have since been devastated as a result of the Gulf War and subsequent international sanctions and monitoring. This raises serious questions as to why U.S. aid has either remained steady or actually increased each year since.

In the hypothetical event that all U.S. aid to Israel were immediately cut off, it would be many years before Israel would be under significantly greater military threat than it is today. Israel has both a major domestic arms industry and an existing military force far more capable and powerful than any conceivable combination of opposing forces. There would be no question of Israel's survival being at risk militarily in the foreseeable future. When Israel was less dominant militarily, there was no such consensus for U.S. backing of Israel. Though the recent escalation of terrorist attacks inside Israel has raised widespread concerns about the safety of the Israeli public, the vast majority of U.S. military aid has no correlation to counterterrorism efforts.

In short, the growing U.S. support for the Israeli government, like U.S. support for allies elsewhere in the world, is not motivated primarily by objective security needs or a strong moral commitment to the country. Rather, as elsewhere, U.S. foreign policy is motivated primarily to advance its own perceived strategic interests.

## STRATEGIC REASONS FOR CONTINUING U.S. SUPPORT

There is a broad bipartisan consensus among policymakers that Israel has advanced U.S. interest in the Middle East and beyond.

- Israel's frequent wars have provided battlefield testing for American arms, often against Soviet weapons.
- It has served as a conduit for U.S. arms to regimes and movements too unpopular in the United States for openly granting direct military assistance, such as apartheid South Africa, the Islamic Republic in Iran, the military junta in Guatemala, and the Nicaraguan Contras. Israeli military advisers have assisted the Contras, the Salvadoran junta, and foreign occupation forces in Namibia and Western Sahara.
- Israel's intelligence service has assisted the U.S. in intelligence gathering and covert operations.
- Israel has missiles capable of reaching as far as the former Soviet Union, it possesses a nuclear arsenal of hundreds of weapons, and it has cooperated with the U.S. military-industrial complex with research and development for new jet fighters and anti-missile defense systems.

## U.S. AID INCREASES AS ISRAEL GROWS STRONGER

The pattern of U.S. aid to Israel is revealing. Immediately following Israel's spectacular victory in the 1967 war, when it demonstrated its military superiority in the region, U.S. aid shot up by 450%. Part of this increase, according to the *New York Times*, was apparently related to Israel's willingness to provide the U.S. with examples of new Soviet weapons captured during the war. Following the 1970-71 civil war in Jordan, when Israel's potential to curb revolutionary movements outside its borders became apparent, U.S. aid increased another sevenfold. After attacking Arab armies in the 1973 war were successfully countered by the largest U.S. airlift in history, with Israel demonstrating its power to defeat surprisingly strong Soviet-supplied forces, military aid increased by another 800%.

- Israel has successfully prevented victories by radical nationalist movements in Lebanon and Jordan, as well as in Palestine.
- Israel has kept Syria, for many years an ally of the Soviet Union, in check.
- Israel's air force is predominant throughout the region.

These increases paralleled the British decision to withdraw its forces from “east of the Suez,” which also led to the massive arms sales and logistical cooperation with the Shah’s Iran, a key component of the Nixon Doctrine.

Aid quadrupled again in 1979 soon after the fall of the Shah, the election of the right-wing Likud government, and the ratification of the Camp David Treaty, which included provisions for increased military assistance that made it more of a tripartite military pact than a traditional peace agreement. (It is noteworthy that the additional aid provided to Israel in the treaty continued despite the Begin government’s refusal to abide by provisions relating to Palestinian autonomy.) Aid increased yet again soon after the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon. In 1983 and 1984, when the United States and Israel signed memoranda of understanding on strategic cooperation and military planning and conducted their first joint naval and air military exercises, Israel was rewarded by an additional \$1.5 billion in economic aid. It also received another half million dollars for the development of a new jet fighter.

During and immediately after the Gulf War, U.S. aid increased an additional \$650 million. When Israel dramatically increased its repression in the occupied territories—including incursions into autonomous Palestinian territories provided in treaties guaranteed by the U.S. government—U.S. aid increased still further and shot up again following the September 11 terrorist attacks against the United States.

The correlation is clear: the stronger and more willing to cooperate with U.S. interests that Israel becomes, the stronger the support.

## ENSURING ISRAEL’S MILITARY SUPERIORITY

Therefore, the continued high levels of U.S. aid to Israel comes not out of con-

cern for Israel’s survival, but as a result of the U.S. desire for Israel to continue its political dominance of the Palestinians and its military dominance of the region. Indeed, leaders of both American political parties have called not for the U.S. to help maintain a military balance between Israel and its neighbors, but for insuring Israeli military superiority.

Since the terrorist attacks against the United States on September 11, there has again been some internal debate regarding how far the United States should back Israeli policies, now under the control of right-wing political leader Ariel Sharon. Some of the more pragmatic conservatives from the senior Bush administration, such as Secretary of State Colin Powell, have cautioned that unconditional backing of Sharon’s government during a period of unprecedented repression in the occupied territories would make it more difficult to get the full cooperation of Arab governments in prosecuting the campaign against terrorist cells affiliated with the al Qaeda network. Some of the more right-wing elements, such as Paul Wolfowitz of the Defense Department, have been arguing that Sharon was an indispensable ally in the war against terrorism and that the Palestinian resistance was essentially part of an international terrorist conspiracy against democratic societies.

## OTHER CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

Support for Israel’s ongoing occupation and repression is not unlike U.S. support for Indonesia’s 24-year occupation of and repression in East Timor or Morocco’s ongoing occupation of and repression in Western Sahara. If seen to be in the strategic interests of the United States, Washington is quite willing to support the most flagrant violation of international law and human rights by its allies and block the United Nations or any other party from challenging it. No ethnic lobby or ideological affinity is necessary to motivate policymakers to do otherwise.

As long as the amoral imperatives of realpolitik remain unchallenged, U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East and elsewhere will not reflect the American public’s longstanding belief that U.S. international relations should be guided by humanitarian principles and ethics.

Some of the worst cases of U.S. support for repression have not remained unchallenged, leading to reversals in U.S. policy on Vietnam, Central America, South Africa, and East Timor. In these cases, grass roots movements supportive of peace and justice grew to a point where liberal members of Congress, in the media and elsewhere, joined in the call to stop U.S. complicity in the repression. In other cases, such as U.S. support for Morocco’s invasion and occupation of Western Sahara, too few Americans are even aware of the situation to mount a serious challenge, so it remains off the radar screen of lawmakers and pundits.

The case of Israel and Palestine is different, however. There are significant sectors of the population that question U.S. policy, yet there is a widespread consensus among elite sectors of government and the media in support of U.S. backing of the Israeli occupation. Indeed, many of the same liberal Democrats in Congress who supported progressive movements on other foreign policy issues agree with President George W. Bush—or, in some cases, are even further to the right—on the issue of Israel and Palestine. Therefore, while the perceived strategic imperative is at the root of U.S. support for Israel, there are additional factors that have made this issue more difficult for peace and human rights activists than most others. These include the following:

- \* The sentimental attachment many liberals—particularly among the post-war generation in leadership positions in government and the media—have for Israel. Many Americans identify with Israel’s internal democracy, progressive social institutions (such as the *kib-*

*butzim*), relatively high level of social equality, and its important role as a sanctuary for an oppressed minority group that spent centuries in diaspora. Through a mixture of guilt regarding Western anti-Semitism, personal friendships with Jewish Americans who identify strongly with Israel, and fear of inadvertently encouraging anti-Semitism by criticizing Israel, there is enormous reluctance to acknowledge the seriousness of Israeli violations of human rights and international law.

- \* The Christian Right, with tens of millions of followers and a major base of support for the Republican Party, has thrown its immense media and political clout in support for Ariel Sharon and other right-wing Israeli leaders. Based in part on a messianic theology that sees the ingathering of Jews to the Holy Land as a precursor for the second coming of Christ, the battle between Israelis and Palestinians is, in their eyes, simply a continuation of the battle between the Israelites and the Philistines, with God in the role of a cosmic real estate agent who has deemed that the land belongs to Israel alone—secular notions regarding international law and the right of self-determination notwithstanding.
- \* Mainstream and conservative Jewish organizations have mobilized considerable lobbying resources, financial contributions from the Jewish community, and citizen pressure on the news media and other forums of public discourse in support of the Israeli government. Although the role of the pro-Israel lobby is often greatly exaggerated—with some even claiming it is the primary factor influencing U.S. policy—its role has been important in certain tight congressional races and in helping to create a climate of intimidation among those who seek to moderate U.S. policy, including growing numbers of progressive Jews.s.
- \* The arms industry, which contributes five times more money to congressional campaigns and lobbying efforts than AIPAC and other pro-Israel groups, has considerable stake in supporting massive arms shipments to Israel and other Middle Eastern allies of the United States. It is far easier, for example, for a member of Congress to challenge a \$60 million arms deal to Indonesia, for example, than the more than \$2 billion of arms to Israel, particularly when so many congressional districts include factories that produce such military hardware.
- \* The widespread racism toward Arabs and Muslims so prevalent in American society, often perpetuated in the media. This is compounded by the identification many Americans have with Zionism in the Middle East as a reflection of our own historic experience as pioneers in North America, building a nation based upon noble, idealistic values while simultaneously suppressing and expelling the indigenous population.
- \* The failure of progressive movements in the United States to challenge U.S. policy toward Israel and Palestine in an effective manner. For many years, most mainstream peace and human rights groups avoided the issue, not wanting to alienate many of their Jewish and other liberal constituents supportive of the Israeli government and fearing criticism of Israeli policies might inadvertently encourage anti-Semitism. As a result, without any countervailing pressure, liberal members of Congress had little incentive not to cave in to pressure from supporters of the Israeli government. Meanwhile, many groups on the far left and others took a stridently anti-Israel position that did not just chal-

lenge Israeli policies but also questioned Israel's very right to exist, severely damaging their credibility. In some cases, particularly among the more conservative individuals and groups critical of Israel, a latent anti-Semitism would come to the fore in wildly exaggerated claims of Jewish economic and political power and other statements, further alienating potential critics of U.S. policy.

## CONCLUSION

While U.S. support for Israeli occupation policies, like U.S. support for its allies elsewhere, is primarily based upon the country's support for perceived U.S. security interests, there are other factors complicating efforts by peace and human rights groups to change U.S. policy. Despite these obstacles, the need to challenge U.S. support of the Israeli occupation is more important than ever. Not only has it led to enormous suffering among the Palestinians and other Arabs, ultimately it hurts the long-term interests of both Israel and the United States, as increasingly militant and extremist elements arise out of the Arab and Islamic world in reaction

Ultimately, there is no contradiction between support for Israel and support for Palestine, for Israeli security and Palestinian rights are not mutually exclusive but mutually dependent on each other. U.S. support of the Israeli government has repeatedly sabotaged the efforts of peace activists in Israel to change Israeli policy, which the late Israeli General and Knesset member Matti Peled referred to as pushing Israel "toward a posture of calloused intransigence." Perhaps the best kind of support the United States can give Israel is that of "tough love"—unconditional support for Israel's right to live in peace and security within its internationally-recognized border, but an equally clear determination to end the occupation. This is the challenge for those who take seriously such basic values as freedom, democracy, and the rule of law.