



Palestine and Israel

By Stephen Zunes, Foreign Policy In Focus Middle East Editor

There is a widespread assumption that resolution of the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians is extremely complex and that the U.S. has been and still is the best hope for peace. The reality, however, is just the opposite.

For nearly thirty years, the international consensus for peace in the Middle East has involved the withdrawal of

Israeli forces to within internationally recognized boundaries in return for security guarantees from Israel's neighbors, the establishment of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, some special status for a shared Jerusalem, and a recognition of the rights of Palestinian refugees. During that same period, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), under the leadership of Yasir Arafat, has evolved from engaging in acts of terrorism and the open call for Israel's destruction to supporting the international consensus for a two-state solution. Israeli public opinion has evolved partially in that direction as well.

The Israelis offered to return the majority of the occupied territories to the Palestinians during the U.S.-mediated negotiations at Camp David this summer. However, this was far short of the total withdrawal required under international law, which prohibits the expansion of any nation's territory by military force and which was reiterated in UN Security Council Resolution 242, long considered the basis for a peace settlement. Furthermore, the Israeli proposal allowed for continued Israeli control over illegal Jewish settlements, military outposts, and a network of exclusive highways throughout the West Bank and Gaza, resulting in a Palestinian territory divided into small, noncontiguous units and rendering the establishment of an economically viable state virtually impossible.

Thus, when President Bill Clinton and other U.S. officials blamed the Palestinians for the breakdown of the talks in the summer of 2000, there was a strong sense of outrage among Palestinians. They had thought that taking a position to the negotiating table consistent with international law and UN Security Council resolutions would lead to a recovery of their lands seized by Israel in 1967. It is not surprising that many Palestinians have come to believe that violent resistance is the only route left. Large-scale rioting, with occasional guerrilla attacks against Israeli occupation forces and Israeli settlers, began in late September.

Though Israel has never been more strategically secure in its history, U.S. military support is at an all-time high. Israel represents only one one-thousandth of the world's population, and Israeli Jews enjoy the world's 16th highest per capita income, yet Israel receives 40% of all U.S. foreign aid. Direct aid to Israel in recent years has exceeded \$3.5 billion annually.

Although the American public appears to strongly support Israel's right to exist and wants the U.S. to be a guarantor of that right, there is growing skepticism regarding the excessive level and unconditional nature of U.S. aid to Israel. Yet, few elected officials are calling for reduced aid levels in the foreseeable future, particularly since almost all U.S. aid to Israel returns to the United States either via purchases of American armaments or as interest payments to U.S. banks for previous loans.

There is a major contradiction between the U.S. role as chief mediator of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and its role as the principal economic, diplomatic, and military supporter of Israeli occupation policies. That contradiction is directly responsible for the disillusionment leading to the ongoing Palestinian uprising.

Key Points

- The U.S. has never supported the international consensus for Israeli-Palestinian peace, requiring the withdrawal of Israeli forces from the occupied territories and an independent Palestine alongside a secure Israel.
- The current Palestinian uprising is a direct result of the failure of the U.S. to support such a peace settlement based on international law and UN Security Council resolutions.
- Washington's policies, including large-scale military and economic aid in support of the Israeli occupation, have compromised the credibility of the U.S. as an effective mediator.

However, Washington has traditionally rejected the international consensus, supports a greatly expanded Jerusalem under Israeli sovereignty, and opposes the right of Palestinian refugees to return home. The U.S. advocates only partial Israeli withdrawal from occupied Palestinian territories. Furthermore, the U.S. refuses to support an independent Palestine beyond the parameters that Israel is willing to stipulate, nor will Washington pressure Israel to end its illegal policies of confiscating Palestinian land and constructing Jewish-only settlements and roads.

The Palestinians essentially acknowledged Israeli control over 78% of Palestine—the territory within Israel's internationally recognized borders—in the 1993 Oslo Accords. However, the Israelis also occupy over 60% of the remaining portion of Palestine—the West Bank and Gaza Strip—seized by Israel in the 1967 war. The remaining territory is under the corrupt and autocratic rule of Arafat's Palestine National Authority in a patchwork arrangement of limited autonomy that more resembles American Indian reservations or the infamous Bantustans of apartheid-era South Africa than a viable country.

Problems with Current U.S. Policy

As long as U.S. military, diplomatic, and economic support of the Israeli government remains unconditional—despite Israel's ongoing violation of human rights, international law, UN Security Council resolutions, and previous agreements with the Palestinians—there is no incentive for the Israeli government to change its policies. The growing Arab resentment that results can only threaten the long-term security interests of both Israel and the United States.

The Palestinians are an occupied population, not unlike the Kuwaitis under Iraq in 1990-91 or the East Timorese under Indonesia from 1975 to 1999. However one may wish to challenge the tactics or ideology of the Palestinians resisting the occupation, the onus of responsibility lies with the Israeli occupiers and the U.S. government which supports them. The decision by some Palestinians to engage in violence can in large part be attributed to disillusionment over Washington's refusal to live up to its obligations to enforce United Nations resolutions that call on Israel to abide by basic principles of international law.

For years, the United States refused to allow the Palestinians to even take part in the peace process, on the grounds that the PLO would not endorse UN Security Council Resolution 242, which requires Israel's neighbors to provide security guarantees for Israel in return for an Israeli withdrawal from Arab lands seized in the 1967 war. Once the PLO endorsed the resolution as the basis of peace, however, the U.S. quickly backed away from its support of the resolution. In fact, the U.S. has formally vetoed and informally blocked scores of UN Security Council resolutions criticizing ongoing Israeli violations of international law and basic human rights, and Washington has prevented the enforcement of the few resolutions that have passed.

One of the major obstacles to Israeli-Palestinian peace is the expansion of Israeli settlements in the occupied territories. These settlements were established in violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention, which forbids an occupying power from colonizing territories seized by military force. This principle is reiterated in UN Security Council Resolution 446, which requires Israel to withdraw from these illegal settlements. However, not only has the U.S. refused to insist that Israel abide by this resolution, Washington has even secured additional aid for Israel to construct highways connecting these settlements and to provide them with additional security, thereby reinforcing their permanence. This places the United States in direct violation of UN Security Council Resolution 465, which "calls upon all states not to provide Israel with any assistance to be used specifically in connection with settlements in the occupied territories."

The White House contends that the Oslo Accords render such UN resolutions obsolete. However, such resolutions cannot be reversed without the approval of the UN body in question; the U.S. cannot unilaterally discount their relevance. Neither the secretary-general nor any other member of the UN Security Council supports the U.S. position. Furthermore, no bilateral agreement (like Oslo) can supersede the authority of the UN Security Council, particularly if one of the two parties (in this case, the Palestinians) believes that these resolutions are still binding.

Detailed reports by Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the UN High Commission on Human Rights, and independent Israeli and Palestinian human rights groups have demonstrated that the Israeli occupation forces are the major perpetrators of the violence. This probably explains why Israel has refused to allow an independent international commission to investigate the violence or to allow UN peacekeeping forces into the territories, as the Palestinians have demanded.

Particularly disappointing to Palestinians' sense of justice is Washington's refusal to join the international community in its condemnation of Israel's ongoing human rights violations. The U.S. recently abstained in an otherwise-unanimous UN Security Council resolution condemning Israel for its human rights violations and voted against similar resolutions by the General Assembly and the Human Rights Commission. The U.S. House of Representatives passed a resolution in October 2000 by a margin of 365-30 blaming the Palestinians exclusively for the violence and declaring its solidarity with the Israelis. Both Al Gore and George W. Bush made similar statements in the waning days of their presidential campaigns, as did the congressional leaders of both parties. Such actions, reinforced by Washington's decision to supply Israeli occupation forces with weapons, have essentially given Israel the green light for its ongoing repression and led Israel's political right wing to electoral victory.

It is therefore quite understandable why the United States is no longer trusted to be an honest broker in the negotiations. It is also not surprising that so many Palestinians have resorted to violence in demanding rights denied them by a "peace process" so antithetical to their legitimate aspirations.

Key Problems

- Washington's refusal to push Israel to compromise has strengthened right-wing political leaders like Ariel Sharon.
 - The U.S. has undermined the enforcement of UN Security Council resolutions, including those involving Israel's ongoing illegal settlement activities on occupied Palestinian land, and has failed to support basic principles of international law that are fundamental to establishing Israeli-Palestinian peace.
 - The U.S. continues to arm and support Israeli occupation forces despite their ongoing human rights violations.
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Toward a New Foreign Policy

Peace between Israelis and Palestinians is possible, because Israeli security and Palestinian rights are not mutually exclusive but are, rather, mutually dependent. Israel will not be secure until the Palestinians are granted their legitimate rights, and the Palestinians will not be granted their rights until Israel's legitimate security needs are met. An unsustainable peace agreement—like the one that Washington was promoting in December 2000—would be worse than no peace agreement at all.

The U.S. must recognize that Israeli security and Palestinian rights are both necessary for lasting peace. Washington should

Key Recommendations

- The U.S. must pressure Israel to abide by its international obligations to withdraw its settlers and troops from the West Bank and Gaza in return for security guarantees.
- The U.S. should end its opposition to deploying UN peacekeeping forces to separate the sides and stop the ongoing violence.
- Israeli withdrawal, security guarantees, and UN peacekeeping are all consistent with America's moral and strategic commitment to Israel, since such actions are in Israel's own self-interest.

support the Palestinian's right to independence alongside Israel. The U.S. should also maintain its moral and strategic commitment to Israel, working to ensure its survival and its legitimate interests but intervening to apply pressure whenever the Israeli government refuses to make the necessary compromises for peace.

The U.S. must recognize that, whatever the many faults of Yasir Arafat and the Palestinian National Authority, the Palestinian negotiating position concerning the outstanding issues in the peace talks—sharing Jerusalem, the right of refugees to return, Israeli withdrawal from occupied territory, and the evacuation of illegal Jewish settlements—is far more consistent with international law and United Nations Security Council resolutions than is Israel's position. The United States cannot be an effective broker for peace unless it is willing to finally support international law, UN Security Council resolutions, and fundamental human rights.

Unlike during some periods in the country's past, Israel's survival is no longer at stake. The Israeli military is far more powerful than any combination of Arab armies. Despite the threat of occasional suicide bombings, Israelis are generally quite secure within their country's internationally recognized borders.

Israeli soldiers and civilians are most vulnerable when they enter or settle in Palestinian territories seized by Israel in the 1967 war. This is where Palestinian rioters and guerrillas have attacked Israelis; very few attacks have been within Israel itself. The Israeli settlements and roads in occupied Palestine—reserved for Jews only—not only create an apartheid-like situation but also make it extremely difficult for Israeli forces to defend far-flung settlers against a hostile population, angry that foreign occupiers have confiscated their best land. Israel would be far more secure defending a clearly defined and internationally recognized border than bulwarking this network of illegal outposts within Palestinian territory. If the U.S. is really concerned about the security of Israeli soldiers and settlers, Washington must insist that Israel return to within its internationally recognized borders, where its citizens can be safeguarded.

The way to peace, then, is rather straightforward: Israel should repatriate its settlers and withdraw its occupation

troops from lands seized in the 1967 war in return for security guarantees from the Palestinian National Authority and the right of access to Jewish holy places. Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat has already said he will accept such a settlement. Anything less is inconsistent with international law and UN Security Council resolutions. The U.S. should support just such a peace settlement. Given that Israel's internationally recognized borders already include 78% of historic Palestine, it is unreasonable to demand that the Palestinians relinquish their claim to the remaining 22%.

To make peace possible, the United States must unequivocally support the rights of both Israelis and Palestinians to statehood. To do this, Washington must insist that Israel, as much as Iraq or any other country, fully comply with UN Security Council resolutions. The U.S. must suspend military and economic aid to Israel until the Israelis end their ongoing violations of UN Security Council resolutions and internationally recognized human rights. Such a move should be part of a comprehensive arms control process in the Middle East, requiring the U.S. to suspend arms shipments and economic aid to any other government in the region that engages in similar violations.

Pressure from Washington has traditionally helped Israeli moderates convince the Israeli public that failure to compromise would jeopardize their country's close relationship with the United States. By publicly claiming that the Israelis had made greater sacrifices than the Palestinians, Washington emboldened Israel's political right wing to portray the government of Prime Minister Ehud Barak as having given away too much. The result was Ariel Sharon's victory in the February 2001 election.

Washington should assume the role of a responsible mediator and recognize that a real peace is more important than a Pax Americana. Otherwise, the United States should step aside and allow the United Nations, the European Union, or some other body that recognizes the rights and obligations of both parties to take the lead in the peace process.

Since no lasting peace settlement can be achieved until the fighting stops, the United Nations must be allowed to send in an international peacekeeping force to separate the sides, and an impartial international commission must be established to investigate the causes of the violence. The Palestinian National Authority has called for just such actions. The U.S. has opposed such a deployment, on the grounds that it was unacceptable to Israel. However, since the land in question is occupied territory, not legally part of Israel itself, Israel's permission is not required.

If the United States really wants to be a friend of Israel, Washington must apply some "tough love." This requires both unconditional support for Israel's right to exist in peace and security and an insistence that Israel uphold its international obligations to withdraw its settlers and troops from the occupied territories. Only then will the violence end, and peace can become a reality.

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Sources for More Information

Organizations

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Foreign Policy in Focus is a joint project of the Interhemispheric Resource Center (IRC) and the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS). The Self-Determination series is funded by the Carnegie Corporation. The project depends on sales and subscription income, individual donors, and grants from foundations and churches. *In Focus* internships are available, and we invite article queries and comments.
ISSN 1524-1939

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