

THE ARAB-ISRAELI CONFLICT AND US FOREIGN POLICY

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ABSTRACT:

The Arab Israel conflict remains one of the most considerable and complex dilemmas facing the international community. The enduring quarrel between Israelis and Arabs has directly and indirectly propagated many regional wars in the past five decades, jeopardized Western entrance to important oil resources in the Middle East, provided a good reason for increased militarization throughout the region, and caused a high amount of civilian deaths as a consequence of terrorism. On the other hand, Israeli-Palestinian (Arab) peace prospects are not very hopeful because the ongoing clashes frequently sabotage every peace settlement between the two nations which eventually affect regional peace. The issue holds a significant place in US foreign policy since its birth and White House has spawned serious efforts to create peace in the region. Apart from bringing peace to the region, Washington has its own reasons for involvement in Middle East such as access to the oil resources, economic interests, terrorism but the core problem plays a major role in US participation in the affairs of the region. Every US president from Truman to Obama has advocated many peace plans which even reached towards a settlement but at the end, proved to be futile. To determine the background for understanding the current situation, it is necessary to evaluate the roots of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and probable solutions to end the controversy.

The beginning of Arab-Israeli conflict can be traced back to the 1890s with the official foundation of the Zionist Organization, called the Jewish national movement seeking return of the Jews to their ancient homeland in Palestine (a geographic area that includes both present day Israel and Jordan). Both of these territories were the integral part of Ottoman Empire since 1516. Therefore, Palestine did not exist as a unified entity before the WWI. The specific land was divided between two Ottoman provinces: province of Beirut in north and the district of Jerusalem in south. The majority of the population was Muslims and came under the subjugation of Ottoman Empire and local governors were appointed by the Ottoman court in Constantinople (Istanbul). In November 1917 the British Government issued the Balfour Declaration. It was issued by Arthur Balfour, British foreign minister in the form of a letter to Lord Rothschild, who was the leading figure of the British Jewry. The Declaration called for the 'establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people' and pledged that the United Kingdom would 'use its best endeavors to facilitate the achievement of this objective, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine.'¹ The Holy city of Jerusalem came under the British rule in the same year extended for next three decades because after the end of WWI the League of Nations approved the British Mandate for its Ottoman Possessions in 1922. According to the 1922 census 78% were the Muslims and 11% were Jews in the respective territory. This ratio was changed in 1947 and the percentage of Jews was increased up to 31%. The reason of extension in population has two acuties. First, the Jews and West proclaimed that the mass transition of Jews was actually escaping from Nazi persecution in Europe whereas, Palestine's Arabs viewed Jewish immigration into the country as a political issue rather than a humanitarian one. To counter the Jews threat and Western involvement the League of Arab States was founded in 1945, marking the tangible emergence of an Arab state system within the broader Middle East region.² Whereas the conflict of land possession between the two nations began in 1920 and with passage of time exceeds limits, Jewish insurgency against native Arabs and their hostility crossed the boundaries, therefore in 1947 United Kingdom turned the Palestine problem over to the UN. On 29th November 1947, the UN General Assembly passed Resolution 181(11)

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calling for the partition of Palestine into two independent states, one Jewish, the other Arab, linked in an economic union. The city of Jerusalem was to be placed under an international regime, with its residents given the right to citizenship in either the Jewish or the Arab state.³ The Arab world rejected the UNGA Resolution 181 completely and collectively attacked on Israel on 15th May 1948, right after the establishment of the State of Israel. The war was not only won by Israel but it also captured far more territory than it had originally envisaged under the UN partition plan. Almost 700,000 to 800,000 Palestinian were become refugees in neighboring countries, the actual number of refugees was unknown. Israel estimates the figure at 538,000, the UN at 720,000, while Palestinian sources believe it to be 850,000.⁴ This mass Palestinian evacuation and the additional birth of the refugee crisis is the most decisive event in Palestinian history which persuaded the crystallization of Palestinian national identity and the development of the conflict. In addition, it is directly related to the contemporary peace negotiations between the two nations and has deeply affected any final settlement till now.

THE RISE OF THE CONFLICT DURING THE COLD WAR

In early 1950s the center of world power was transferred from United Kingdom to United States of America and former Soviet Union; it was the emergence of bipolar system as well as the beginning of the Cold War. The Arab-Israeli conflict dawned upon US foreign policy makers with the advent of the Cold War, chiefly in 1947-1948, when the possible partition of Palestine was being presented to the United Nations. For most of the Americans, before 1947, Middle East was an area outside the political map and the apprehension of England and France. The bulk of Zionist leadership was in Europe, and American Jews, after 1934, were concerned with the fate of Jews in Europe than they were with Palestine.⁵ Therefore the Cold War gave a boost to the important conflict.

The major incident which focused the world attention in the early days of Cold War was the 2nd war between Arabs and Israel which was fought by the coalition of England, France and Israel against the Egypt on the issue of nationalization of the Suez Canal by Egyptian President Jamal Abdul Nassir. England and France viewed this action as a challenge to their economic security and prestige whereas, Israel faced continuous guerrilla attacks from Egyptian controlled Gaza. In April 1956, Egyptian artillery had initiated a sustained assault, also from Gaza, on Israeli settlements in the Negev. Nassir' blocked the Strait of Tiran prevented merchant ships from reaching the Israeli port of Eilat. The nationalization of the canal had enabled Egypt to enforce the Arab economic boycott of Israel by preventing ships destined for Tel Aviv or Haifa from using the canal. In the last days of October 1956, Israeli troops crossed the Egyptian border and within a week had overwhelmed Sinai.⁶ French and English forces landed on Egyptian soil on 5 November, to show the world that they were separate parties but in reality, it was a preplanned action to force Nassir to denationalize the canal. The scheme was brought to a halt by Soviet and US pressure on France; the United Kingdom and Israel and the whole affair had major implications: for relations between the US and its foremost Western allies, the United Kingdom and France; for Soviet involvement in the region; for Israel's strategic relationship with France; and for the standing of France and the United Kingdom in the Middle East.⁷ Suez crisis increased the status of Nassir immensely particularly in the Arab world and in 1958, Syria and Egypt formed United Arab Republic (UAR) under his leadership. Nassir's efforts played a very decisive role in Arab unity.

Jamal Abdul Nasser became the hero of the Arab world after the Suez crisis and addressed all issues concerning the Arab peace. He demanded the restoration of the Palestinian people's rights, which, had been usurped by the cursed Zionist state. He also

began to acclaim the impending annihilation of Israel. Yet, increasingly violent statements apart, Nasser failed to assert war on Israel, expressed that he would welcome a war should the Zionist state prefer to start one. On 14 May 1967, as an initial step, Nasser sent several hundred Egyptian soldiers into the Sinai Peninsula and demanded the withdrawal of the United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF) from Egyptian soil and finally, declared the Straits of Tiran closed for Israeli shipping. From that point onwards, the Egyptian president's speeches became increasingly aggressive. On the morning of 5 June 1967, the Israeli air force launched a surprise attack against the airfields of neighbouring Egypt and Syria. Two hours later, their air forces lay in ruins. To justify its antagonistic attacks Israel put the entire burden on a series of steps of Egyptian President Nasser. The scale of the Israeli operation raised the level of violence in the Middle East to new and worrying heights. Worse, it signaled the possibility of further escalation in the future.⁸ The momentum of Israel's triumph was shocking to the Arabs, who had anticipated victory. Egypt, Jordan, and Syria lost almost all of their air forces and much of their armed weaponry. Israel's losses were very few in contrast to the Arab forces. Within six days, Israel had won a decisive land; its forces had taken control of the Gaza Strip and the Sinai Peninsula from Egypt, the West Bank and East Jerusalem from Jordan, and the Golan Heights from Syria.⁹ On November 22, the UN passed Resolution 242, which called for Israel to withdraw from the Occupied Territories; in return Arab states would recognize Israel's independence and guarantee secure borders for Israel.¹⁰ The Israeli military proved that it was one of the best armies in the world at that time. They had advanced strategic planning, technologically superior weaponry, exceptional training and above all, devoted troops. The Israeli's fought single-handedly because they were competent enough to taking care of themselves. Their victory in the 1967 war left the Arab world particularly Egypt, both militarily and psychologically wounded. It resulted in mounting Soviet influence over the Arab states, as they looked for a supporter to help them rebuild their military capability as well as paved the US- Israeli strategic relationship. The war entered the Arab-Israel conflict in a new phase.

The War of Attrition was started soon after the Six day war, to some extent it was a continuation of the 1967 war, but on a much smaller scale. It was characterized by intensive cross-border shelling between Israel and Egypt and an upsurge in the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO's) guerrilla warfare and terrorist operations. The summer of 1968 saw the first Palestinian hijacking of an international airliner and the formulation of the PLO's National Covenant, which declared the existence of the State of Israel to be null and void (article 19) and rejected any form of Compromise (article 21).¹¹ Yasser Arafat became the leader of the PLO in February 1969 as Fatah gradually assumed control of the majority of seats in the Palestine National Council, holding 33 of the 57 seats allocated to the paramilitary groups.¹² Arafat's chief objective was to form the PLO into a cohesive political and military organization, which he hoped would find assistance from the Arab states. One of the factors that helped Arafat to presume the leadership of the PLO was the battle at Karameh. In March 1968, Israel attacked the Jordanian town of Karameh in retaliation for an attack on an Israeli bus, which was blown up by a mine. Karameh was the site of a Palestinian refugee camp and was also the headquarters of Fatah. An intense battle took place, although Fatah was finally defeated but Israel suffered heavy casualties. The Palestinians had been joined by the Jordanian Army at Karameh and its defence became a rallying point for Arab nationalists, with the result that thousands of Arabs joined Fatah and the fedayeen. Karameh had another important consequence for the PLO, as it led to direct cooperation between Egypt and Fatah.¹³ Continued fighting in the region was alarming for both superpowers of the world especially, USA because it held a much stronger position in the region than USSR.

Despite the Cold War, and US involvement in Vietnam, it began to use its rising influence with Israel to increase its political leverage over the Arab states. The US Administration, in Washington, DC, Brokered a cease-fire in the War of Attrition in 1970 and the death of Egypt's President Nasser, later in the same year, provided USA with an opportunity to capitalize the growing tensions between Egypt's new President, Anwar Sadat and his Soviet patron.¹⁴ Refusal of massive armed shipment by USSR created a rift between Egypt and Soviet Union. That rift motivated Sadat to come closer to Washington with this belief that only USA was capable of persuading Israel to return the Sinai. In July 1972, Sadat opened a secret channel of communication with USA and the following year, he expelled 4,000 Soviet advisors. This ultimately resulted in Sadat's repudiation of the 15-years Treaty of Friendship with the USSR in 1976.¹⁵ Apart from the fact that Egyptian-US relations entered in a new phase in 1970s, President Sadat realized that Arab Pride should also be restored which has been greatly damaged in the 1967 war and his image should be secure in front of the Arab world.

Syrian and Egyptian combined forces invaded Israel on its holiest day in October 1973. This war is known as the Yom Kippur War in Israel and Ramadan War in the Arab world. The war was a surprise for Israel in its early stages and the Jewish state suffered heavy losses. Egyptian forces crossed the Suez Canal and overran Israeli stronghold while the Syrians infiltrated deep into the Golan Heights. The war increased at such level that UN had to come in and impose a cease-fire. The 1973 war raised the possibility that the Arab-Israeli conflict could escalate into a quarrel between the superpowers. During the war negotiations between Israel and Egypt continued and came to an end with the second Sinai Disengagement (Sinai II) in 1975.

The devastation of 1973 war forced the combatant parties to resolve their differences at the table therefore; a peace process between them was initiated. President Anwar Sadat visited Jerusalem in 1977, which was itself a historic moment in Middle East politics. This peace process was concluded on a peace treaty between Egypt and Israel in 1979, known as the Camp David Accords. Camp David provided for a fragmentary Israeli withdrawal from Sinai within nine months and a total evacuation in three years. In return Egypt offered Israel full diplomatic ties, freedom of Israeli passage through the Straits of Tiran, an international police force on shared borders and bilateral talks on economic and cultural normalization. However, Camp David endorsed the preferred Israeli option of Palestinian autonomy in the occupied territories and was thus, rejected by PLO and most Arab states. Egypt was expelled from the Arab League, on the grounds that the idea of self-rule envisaged in the proposal was a denial of the existence of the Palestinian people and an attempt to legalize the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land.¹⁶

PLO was settled in southern Lebanon known as 'Fatahland' after its extraction from Jordan by King Hussein in 1970. Soon it developed it as a base of PLO for attacks into Israel. To halt the PLO's attacks, Israel invaded Lebanon in 1978. The first invasion is known as Operation Litani. Although, Israeli forces officially withdrew from Lebanon the same year but the raging civil war and instability in both countries were continue. The Israeli ambassador to the United Kingdom and Ireland was killed in 1982 by Abu Nidal Black June group in return Israeli Cabinet authorized retaliatory strikes against Palestinian bases in Lebanon. In reaction PLO opened fire on Galilee in northern Israel. Israeli Cabinet approved a major military action inside Lebanon termed as War of Desperation or the War of Choice. Its subsequent entanglement continued for a decade and lasted till 2000. This war not only divided the Israeli society but immensely damaged Israel's global image. The consequences of war radicalized Lebanese society as well as forced to PLO leadership take

refuge in Tunisia because its military infrastructure in Lebanon was destroyed.¹⁷ The Israeli invasion of Lebanon succeeded its objective of demolition of PLO's military force but its cost was extremely high for Tel Aviv because it lost lives of its own soldiers and also faced intense opposition from the international community. The anti-Israeli sentiments spread all over the Muslim world which resulted in a form of different organizations of Muslim Jihadi groups against Israel in support of PLO, such as 'Hezbollah' (party of God) which quickly evolved as a major anti-Israeli force in Lebanon. Moreover, the death of several hundred Palestinian civilians at the Sabra and Chatila refugee camps from the hands of Christian Phalangists, who were allied to Israel, was presented as evidence of Israel's brutal approach to dealing with the Palestinians.¹⁸

In December 1987, after more than 20 years under military occupation, the Gaza Strip and West Bank erupted in a spontaneous popular uprising that became known as the first intifada (an Arabic word for "shaking off" that quickly entered the international political lexicon).¹⁹ It was an illustration of offense against the Israeli occupation and the swift escalation of Jewish settlement in the territories. Palestinians from all walks of life, youth, merchants, labourers, women and children, staged huge demonstrations, economic boycotts, tax resistance and strikes to protest the military occupation of their land and to demand national independence. Israeli armed forces reacted very cruelly to the protests, which were done mostly by the unarmed Palestinian children and youth who threw stones at the occupying forces. Between 1987 and 1993, over 1,000 Palestinians were killed and tens of thousands were injured as unarmed protests across the occupied Palestinian territory were met with force, including the use of live ammunition, beatings and sometimes the lethal use of tear gas.²⁰ Thousands of Palestinians were apprehended, thousands were sent to prisons in Israel and many were deported from the Palestinian territory. The intifada tinted the existence of a local Palestinian leadership capable of challenging the supremacy of the Tunis-based PLO. Despite the local uprising another reason of weakened influence of PLO was the growing appeal of HAMAS and the Palestinian branch of Muslim Brotherhood in Gaza. In addition, PLO's desire to improve relations with Washington also went against it. Nevertheless, on 15th November 1988, PLO leadership in Algeria called for an international peace conference, under the UN on the basis of Resolution 242 and 338. It proclaimed a Palestinian state, without defined borders, but with Jerusalem as its capital.²¹ The international community welcomed the declaration and immediately 27 Muslim countries and non-aligned nations recognized an independent Palestinian state, whereas, Israel rejected the declaration as well as Palestine state. In place of international conference Israel emphasized on Camp David kind of a formula in which it could avoid the multilateral process and deal with PLO and other Arab states individually. Therefore, at the end of the Cold War, peace process in the Middle East in havoc and needed more focus from the international community especially from the United States.

THE ARAB ISRAEL CONFLICT IN A POST-COLD WAR ERA

The invasion of Iraq on its neighboring country Kuwait in 1990 and the following Gulf War I had deep connections to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. After the Operation Desert Storm (Gulf War I) US began to capitalize on its predominant international position in the post-Cold War era and its post-Gulf War prestige in the Middle East to bring the major regional parties to the conference table.²² The American achievement in convening the conference was not only because of its new global dominance, but also because critical domestic contemplations made it impossible for any of the parties to say no to the USA at that time. Therefore, Israel, who did, not agree to the multilateral talks with Arabs and was not convinced to attend any peace conference, all of a sudden agreed to attend the meeting in Madrid. However, the PLO leadership was not in a position to conclude the dispute

because the first intifada had highlighted the presence of local Palestinian leadership of West Bank and Gaza to the international community and Israel the collapse of USSR left USA as the only superpower which had the power to recognize PLO. Madrid peace conference 1991 provided the bilateral talks between Israel and delegations from Jordan-Palestine, Syria and Lebanon, under US supervision as well as multilateral talks on arms control, refugees, water, the environment and regional economic development, under EU assistance. The Madrid Conference was significant because it set a precedent for Israel entering into bilateral political discussions with representatives of the Palestinian people. It also opened the gates for future peace negotiations such as the Oslo Peace Process.

❖ *Oslo Peace Process I and II (1993-1995)*

Apart from open negotiations in Madrid, secret peace discussions also had been going on between senior Israeli and PLO representatives in the Norwegian capital during 1993. In August these talks concluded in the signing a draft peace agreement, which was officially signed on 13th September 1993 at White House Washington DC. It was an agreement setting out a framework for providing self-rule for Palestinian in the entire West Bank and the Gaza Strip for a transitional period not to exceed five years, during which time the territories would be administered by a Palestinian Authority (PA), which was to be freely and democratically elected after the withdrawal of Israeli military forces both from the Gaza Strip and from the populated areas of the West Bank.²³ The Oslo peace process raised real hopes for justified and lasting settlement to the Arab-Israel conflict.

The first real success which appeared from the Oslo Accord was the Israeli-PLO agreement of Cairo in 1994, through which the PLO rule was established in Gaza and Jericho. This was followed by a peace agreement between Israel and Jordan in the same year. The peace process further extended another agreement between Israel and PLO in 1995 as Israeli-Palestinian Interim Agreement (Oslo II) which widened Palestinian self-rule in the occupied territories and established a framework for Israeli armed redeployment. This process was damaged greatly by the killing of Israeli Prime Minister Robin by an Israeli after a month of Oslo II. Tel Aviv significantly reversed from the Oslo agreement due to the change in government. Nevertheless, the new Prime Minister Netanyahu promoted the peace process and signed Hebron Protocol in 1997 and Wye River Accords in 1998 which increased the Palestinian autonomy and cooperation on security issues.

In 1999 Ehud Barak entered in a government which was greeted by the international community as an opportunity to restart the previous peace process. This culminated in an unprecedented series of negotiations between Clinton, Barak and Arafat at Camp David but these talks failed to achieve an agreement. In late September 2000, there was an eruption of wide scale Palestinian violence on a visit of Defense Minister, Ariel Sharon at al-Aqsa mosque. This violence turned into the second intifada (uprising) popularly known as al-Aqsa intifada, leading to the disintegration of the Oslo process. The stones of the first intifada turned into guns and suicide operations which reflected a sense of pessimism about Israel's willingness to agree to a practical Palestinian state on the entire West Bank and Gaza. At Camp David, Israeli officials agreed to give the Palestinians the whole of Gaza and 92% of the West Bank and in the next meeting at Egyptian Red Sea resort of Taba in 2001, agreeing to hand over 98% of the West Bank and Gaza, as well as the Palestinian claim to Jerusalem and 'right of return' for Palestinian refugees to their former homes in Israel but the reoccupation of Israeli military in Palestinian territories not only damaged the peace talks but also became the reason of facing international criticism.

❖ *Road Map for Middle East Peace (2003)*

Israeli military intervention forced the world to take some serious measures against Israel to protect innocent Palestinians. Therefore, for the first time UN Security Council adopted

a resolution (UNSC 1397) referring explicitly to the idea of Palestinian statehood in 2002. Following in 2003, the international quartet of the USA, Russia, the EU and the UN adopted a performance-based plan known as the Road Map for Middle East Peace.²⁴ It was based on three phase path to peace, started with the end of terror and hostility and the normalization of life in Palestinian areas. After the achievement of first phase, the second phase would focus on the transition to a Palestinian state with interim borders and characteristics of autonomy based on a new Palestinian constitution. The last stage was to assure a permanent status of Palestinian state under an agreement between Israel and the PA (Palestinian Authorities). The Road Map was accompanied by the election of senior Palestinian official Mahmoud Abbas as the first Prime Minister. However, the Quartet did not introduce a strict mechanism to pave the road towards Palestinian statehood. The American position started from the assumption that a Palestinian state could be realized in 2005. When President Bush was re-elected in 2004, he expressed the hope that the Palestinian state would be established by the end of his second term in 2009. During the meeting between President Bush and the Palestinian President Abu Mazen in October 2005, no dates for the establishment of a Palestinian state were mentioned. This was an indication of the failure of the peace process to attain Palestinian statehood.²⁵ The next shock for the international community and Israel was the 2006 Palestinian election results, which declared the victory of Hamas. The success of Hamas exhibited the local Palestinian approach towards the solutions of their issues because Hamas had a good record of providing extensive social services to a large number of local people living in poverty. The victory of a radical party also made it clear that democracy in Arab countries could bring into power the anti-American radical forces. As soon Hamas took charge of the government, USA and the EU imposed a series of sanctions designed to weaken the democratically elected government which was called upon to recognize Israel first. In fact in June 2007, George Bush gave the green light to the Security organization of the PA to end the rule of Hamas through a military coup.²⁶ In these circumstances, two major wars broke out in the region. The first was Israeli invasion of Southern Lebanon in 2006 and the second was the Israeli attacks on Gaza strip in 2008 and 2009. Both assaults were explicitly supported by Washington and resulted in the suffering of both territories.

ARAB-ISRAELI CONFLICT IN OBAMA ADMINISTRATION

The new US President Barack Obama was elected in 2009; he immediately announced a new policy of rapprochement with the Muslim world but in reality he pursued the same policies as those of his ancestor. Nevertheless, he was the first American President who declared Israel as a "Jewish State." He also relegated the Arab-Israeli conflict in his foreign policy agenda but continued its full support to Israel for example; he overtly supported Tel Aviv on its attack at Gaza in 2009 and the 'Free Gaza' flotilla in 2010. In addition United States used veto power in UN Security Council in 2011, on the question of Israeli colonies in the West Bank and culminated the resolution draft which condemned Israeli colonization of the West Bank. The Obama administration also indicated that it would veto the attempts of the PA to get the recognition of a Palestinian state.

CONCLUSION

For more than three decades, Israelis, Palestinians, Arab leaders, and the rest of the world have looked towards America to lead the effort to build the road to a lasting peace. United States clear and strong commitment to the security of Israel, its strongest ally in the region and its only established democracy creates more vulnerability in the region with other growing threats like: a strong Iran, a muddled Iraq, the revival of al Qaeda, the resistance of Hamas and Hezbollah. Thus, US policy is essentially based on unconditional support to Israel and shows the American hegemony in the Middle East.

After being elected for second term President Obama is now more than ever, willing to strive to secure a lasting settlement of the conflict with two states living side by side in peace and security. To do so, he should not only revisit his own policy but should also force Israel to moderate its tone and work truly for peace and isolating those who seek conflict and instability. The popularity of Hamas in Gaza and the West Bank is no surprise because the group has provided all the basic services to Palestinians that neither the international community nor the Palestinian government could deliver. Nevertheless the recent emergence of Arab spring in the Middle East might influence the White House to re-think its traditional strategy before the balance of power in the region shifts against Israel and radical parties take charge.

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