

## **U.S.-ISRAEL RELATIONS AFTER THE GULF WAR**

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*The U.S.: Between Victory and Decline / Israel: Between Triumph and Fear / The Bush Administration Searches for Direction / A Series of American Errors / Who Cares if Iraq Breaks Apart? / Shamir and Bush: A Mismatch / Swings in American Public Opinion / An Obsession with Jewish Settlements / Israel Still a Strategic Asset*

The world has now entered a period in which the end of the classic colonial era and the beginning of the Third World is coexisting with the end of the Cold War and the absence of Soviet-American confrontation. Indeed, it is often now said in East Europe, for example, that the Communist era will be seen historically as a 45-year interregnum and that the 1930s are in many ways being resurrected.

No one knows quite what this new world will be like, least of all, Americans, who have a very difficult time appreciating disorder. To Americans, the natural manner of the world is a situation of harmony and peacefulness. Americans also believe that all peoples should have a right to self-determination, but this, as Americans are finding more and more, is in conflict with the aim of harmony. The Bush Administration repeatedly, whether in Yugoslavia, Ethiopia or Iraq, seems to be coming down on the side of order at the expense of self-determination. Many Israelis still believe to this day that somehow their region and their situation is anomalous. It appears, however, that the Arab-Israeli conflict and particularly the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is much more typical of the kind of world we are going to see in the post-Cold War period. We are not going to be blessed with the kind of placid new world order that was envisioned after the revolutions of 1989 and the collapse of Communist control over East Europe and the withdrawal of the Soviets from such areas as Kampuchea and Nicaragua.

### **The U.S.: Between Victory and Decline**

Israeli and American societies have reacted philosophically to the end of the Cold War in very different ways. The United States is a country poised between victory and decline. On the one hand, it has won a great victory in the Cold War after 45 years of conflict. As a result, it is today the premier world power. The dominance of economic relations which America has propounded over the last half century has now come to the fore as well. Indeed, we have passed from a world order dominated by the Soviet-American confrontation to one dominated by the economic competition and cooperation between and among the Europeans, Japanese and Americans.

Yet Americans lack a certain degree of confidence in dealing with this changed world. During the Cold War the Soviet Union and the United States basically exhausted each other. Although the consequences of this fatigue have been far more profound for the Soviet Union, the United States has been a victim as well. It is not accidental that the president of the United States recently admitted that he found it easier to fight the war in the Gulf than to solve America's domestic problems. The United States is a country which now faces enormous problems of infrastructure inadequacy, educational decline, inability to compete economically. Historically, George Bush will be seen as very much a transition president, a president between an old order and a new, and one with which he has a very difficult time grappling both externally and internally. Americans are debating whether or not they are in decline. It is not a mood with which to enjoy great dominance. In that sense the military victory in the Persian Gulf war provided a great sense of relief that Americans could still be powerful, allaying any sense of inadequacy for a period of a few weeks or months.

There is every likelihood that this war will be seen very differently in history than it is now seen by the American public. Today the average American is cheering the victory of American forces. It was in a way America's "Six Day War" and Americans have been celebrating. Yet the sense of elation is eroding, in Congress, in the media, and among the foreign policy elite.

## **Israel: Between Triumph and Fear**

Israelis are in a very different situation. Rather than being poised between victory and decline, they are poised between a great sense of triumph and fear. On the one hand, the victory of American forces in the Gulf war was a victory for Israel to the extent that Iraq, the major threat to Israeli security, was weakened. This victory was perhaps not as far-reaching as was anticipated at the end of the war but was nevertheless a significant defeat for Iraq. Certainly, Israel has been a beneficiary of the end of the Cold War, epitomized by the fate of Soviet and Ethiopian Jewry as well as many in East Europe. With the end of the Cold War has come a recrudescence of Israeli influence in East Europe which only stands to grow in importance, as well as a new and important relationship with the Soviet Union which will undoubtedly result in diplomatic relations sooner rather than later. At the same time Israelis fear that this new era will result in pressures upon them. They seem, it often appears to Americans, to be absolutely preoccupied with this fear. They are also worried they will not be able to absorb Soviet Jewry successfully.

Clearly, the two societies are moving in different directions. Israelis still possess self-confidence, some Americans would suggest too much. Americans do not basically believe in themselves any longer. Some of the underlying tensions between the administrations of the two countries can be explained by this difference in the basic direction in which the two body politics are moving.

## **The Bush Administration Searches for Direction**

Let us look in greater detail at the relationship between the Bush and Shamir administrations. First, it is important to remember that the Bush administration is not the Reagan administration revived but the Ford administration reborn. Almost all of the major players in this administration were very important in the Ford administration, including George Bush himself as head of the CIA; Brent Scowcroft, the National Security Advisor, who held the same position under Ford; Richard Cheney, the Defense Secretary, Ford's chief of staff; and James Baker, the Secretary of State, who was head of Ford's election campaign committee. This is very much of a Ford group: pragmatic, non-ideological. It finds Israel's ideological confidence extremely hard to take.

Ronald Reagan, whatever else may be said about him, was a man of vision in the sense that he could see where he was going. He may not have known how to get there; he may not have known what was happening in his own administration, but he had a sense of where he wanted to go. Indeed, people who worked around him often expressed their frustration at his lack of engagement but always complemented his clear sense of objectives.

George Bush is very different. He has only a murky notion of his ultimate goals. Look, for example, at his difficulty defining the new world order. Look, for example, at his difficulty defining for the American people the notion of what the objectives were in the Persian Gulf war. But he is supreme at technicalities and tactics. His could be called the "Let's Make a Deal" administration. Pragmatism is its motto. It can be argued that from Tiananmen Square to the Kurds, from the Baltic states to Yugoslavia, the Bush team is not really interested in people. It is interested in getting the job done, whatever it defines as the job at a particular moment. It is interested in action, progress, results.

This is not an administration that sets down its objectives and then very clearly moves step-by-step in that direction. It seeks to settle the Arab-Israeli issue, but does not really care how it is settled. Belief in settling the Arab-Israeli conflict is like belief in motherhood; it is an act of faith that ending the Arab-Israeli dispute will settle the last issue that is a problem in world affairs and will make everything wonderful. At the same time there are some who ask: Who cares about the Arabs and Israelis? Let them fight each other until the end of time. We Americans have to worry about our own problems. This is a growing attitude, but for now and certainly for the Bush administration solving the Arab-Israeli dispute remains an article of faith.

This administration would find it very difficult to wash its hands completely of the conflict. It has become thoroughly enmeshed in this area of the world, especially since the Persian Gulf war. It has to continue to worry about some sort of security arrangements in the Persian Gulf. It has to continue to be concerned about a restoration of Iraqi power, the danger that the Iraqis will try to make some kind of comeback. And if it is difficult for America to get out of the Gulf it is also difficult for it to exit from of the

Arab-Israeli arena. Another administration, particularly if it comes to power in 1996 rather than 1992, might be very different. George Bush might conceivably step back for a few months, but if he retreats completely from the Arab-Israeli arena he might be forced to have to deal with America's domestic problems. This step he will not take.

## **A Series of American Errors**

This is also an administration that has been extremely fortunate in foreign affairs in that the Cold War happened to end on its watch, even though for a while this major historic development was denied. In looking at the Gulf, it is an administration that has had one great success--the war--and otherwise, previously and since, a whole series of errors. Prior to the war the Bush administration was far more concerned about Israeli settlements than about Iraqi chemical weapons. Indeed, this administration was fighting hard until hours before the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait to ease sanctions against Iraq, fighting hard to take a quiet approach in dealings with Baghdad. The administration believed that Saddam Hussein was a person with whom one could do business--until finally he invaded Kuwait.

Why did the American government make such a mistake? First, the fear of Iran remained strong. Second, this administration, like the Ford administration at the time of the energy crisis of the mid-1970s, regarded the Saudis as being essential to the politics of the area. The Saudis, until August 2nd, thought they could work with the Iraqis. Third, Bush is a president who relies on telephone diplomacy. He likes to phone other presidents and prime ministers for consultations. Until the actual invasion of Kuwait, Egyptian President Mubarak kept telling President Bush that Saddam Hussein had personally assured him that he was not going to attack. Fourth, it should also be remembered that after the Iran-Contra scandal it was considered safe in Washington to be pro-Iraq and dangerous to flirt with Iran. All of these factors combined to make this administration wary of changing its policy toward Baghdad.

We must also not underestimate the importance of the Vietnam syndrome. George Bush may have declared the Vietnam syndrome dead, but the way in which he conducted this war suggests that it is very much alive because there was a conscious attempt to move 180 degrees in the opposite direction. Americans nearly destroyed the enemy and then stopped before there was any danger of significant American casualties. They got out while the going was good, without taking any risks. This factor played an extremely important role in the way in which the United States ended the war.

## **Who Cares if Iraq Breaks Apart?**

Finally, the administration was extremely concerned that if the war went on too long Iraq would fall apart. After all, Iraq is nothing but three Ottoman provinces strung together at

the end of World War I. No one seems to have asked the question: Does it matter if Iraq disintegrates into separate Kurdish, Shiite and Sunni constituencies? If anyone did ask that question, it was immediately dismissed because it was seen as aiding Iran and Syria, potentially harmful to the Turks, and bothersome to the Saudis. Henry Kissinger warned of the danger of creating a vacuum out of Iraq. No one really thought through the question.

One sees the same question in the case of Yugoslavia, the Soviet Union or Ethiopia. What happens if these countries split up into their constituent parts? An argument can be made that in certain cases American interests might well be served. Certainly had Iraq split up there would be less danger of a future nuclear Iraq since it would have a smaller military and economic base from which to threaten anyone. But these questions were never asked.

In addition to all the other reasons mentioned for the timing of the end of the war, the most important was the notion that the United States did not have to proceed further because Saddam Hussein would be destroyed. It was accepted as an article of faith in Washington that somehow one of Saddam Hussein's best buddies was suddenly going to shoot him. But why would one of his henchmen do this? Why would he threaten his own future by trying to kill Saddam Hussein, especially since Saddam was soon winning new military victories against the Shiites and the Kurds. Indeed, many in Washington still believe that if sanctions just proceed long enough Saddam Hussein will be overthrown.

## **Shamir and Bush: A Mismatch**

Looking more closely at the Shamir administration, it appears that Shamir and Bush are a mismatch. In the history of American-Israeli relations it has frequently been the case that Israeli prime ministers and American presidents have been able to personally resolve many problems which existed between their bureaucracies. This could be seen first in the close relationship between Levi Eshkol and Lyndon Johnson. Golda Meir apparently had a kind of mesmerizing impact on Richard Nixon. As Henry Kissinger noted in his memoirs, she would remind him how great a friend he was to the Jewish people and that would solve many problems, even though it was a surprise to many around him.

This system of personal relationships began to break down in the mid-1970s. It is often forgotten that Yitzhak Rabin did not get along well with either Ford or Carter. The relationship between Carter and Menachem Begin has been described as one of mutual suspicion, especially on the American side. In the Reagan-Shamir and Reagan-Peres periods the old personal chemistry was resurrected, but it simply does not work between Shamir and Bush. Part of this is the president's problem. George Bush likes to be buddies, almost drinking buddies, with presidents and prime ministers, and Yitzhak Shamir is just not his type. In that sense one must sympathize with Shamir because no

matter what he seems to do he is never going to be George Bush's "pal." The chemistry was made more explosive because early in the Bush period a series of misunderstandings occurred privately between the two individuals in which both came away feeling that they had been misled. Both assumed they heard things they did not hear. When particular actions did not follow that the other leader had expected, his anger increased. Certainly, both leaders have mishandled each other. The chemistry is poor and it is a factor underlying American-Israeli relations to this day.

There was a potential for a breakthrough between the two men during the Gulf war. Indeed, Shamir's policy seems to have been designed to resurrect his relationship with George Bush and for a few weeks it worked. However, Yitzhak Shamir seems to have assumed, in typical fashion in the Bush-Shamir relationship, that his great sacrifice for George Bush in not ordering Israeli retaliation against Iraq would be amply rewarded. On the other hand, George Bush seems to have assumed that it was the U.S. which did Israel a favor by sending the Patriots and taking out Iraqi arms. Therefore, he felt much less obligated toward Israel than Yitzhak Shamir anticipated.

## **Swings in American Public Opinion**

Today we are left with an era of growing mutual recriminations between the American and Israeli governments and a background of unprecedented public support for Israel. During the war and continuing to this day Israel enjoys a greater degree of support in the public opinion polls than at any time in history, including after the 1967 war. By comparison, in 1990, prior to Saddam's invasion of Kuwait, Israel was receding to its lowest level of support since 1967. The Palestinians, on the other hand, were very severely harmed in American eyes by their support for Iraq and their enthusiasm for the Scud attacks. Since Yassir Arafat backed Saddam Hussein against the United States, one no longer sees articles praising him in the American press.

Yet most public opinion analysts predict that this new Israeli strength is likely to decline because it seems that the United States and Israel are on a collision course. Part of this negative prognosis stems from the anxiousness on the part of the Bush administration to achieve a breakthrough in the region and the perception that it has the most leverage on Israel of all of the parties to the conflict. Part of it has to do with the American desire to continue to prop up Syria's Hafez Assad as a counter to Saddam Hussein. Part has to do with an increasing difference in American perceptions of what Israel's interests are versus what the Israeli government seems to believe its interests are.

To explain, we must look at the two great problems that Israel now faces: 1) the peace process, the Palestinian question, and the Arab-Israeli question generally; and 2) Soviet Jewish absorption. Many in America believe that Israel faces an emergency over Soviet Jewish absorption. Because of Israeli economic difficulties, the United States therefore has more leverage than ever over the Jewish state. The Israeli government, however,

seems to be acting as if the Palestinian question is the critical issue, as epitomized by the conflict over settlements.

## **An Obsession with Jewish Settlements**

George Bush and James Baker are absolutely preoccupied with settlements and there will be constant pressure on Israel because of them. If new buildings are added to existing settlements, they do not make news. If a couple of trailers are set in place when the U.S. Secretary of State is visiting Israel, this action makes front page headlines and has a devastating impact not only on Bush and Baker who see it as a personal affront but on many in Congress, the American Jewish leadership and eventually on public opinion. Settlements are going to poison the relationship and make it more difficult to gain aid. This issue is the major irritant in American-Israeli relations, though frankly it is somewhat irrational on the American side. Whatever the reason, Americans have made it the critical issue. Israelis who do not regard it in the same light do not understand how important it is. Many American Jews who are raising hundreds of millions of dollars, sacrificing many of their own institutions for Soviet Jews, will be furious about anything that could jeopardize financial support for Israel. If the American Jewish leadership becomes upset with Israel, the Bush administration will have greater leverage.

It is galling to many Americans, even many supporters of Israel in Congress and in the administration, to be asked at the same time that Israel is building settlements to guarantee loans of \$10 billion. The Americans are caught in a quandry. They have worked for 25 years to gain the exit of Soviet Jewry and cannot let them starve in Israel. But there is also a great reluctance in the Bush administration to strengthen the Shamir government with such loans. In all likelihood the \$10 billion loan guarantee will be extended in the end, but it will come only after enormous conflict because there is a fundamental incompatibility of worldview between the Shamir and Bush administrations as illustrated by the settlements issue and an incompatibility of personalities.

## **Israel Still a Strategic Asset**

The Gulf war actually has increased Israel's importance to the United States. Israel was held in reserve, but had the American position become jeopardized, it would have had Israel as an ally. Israel has already made improvements in the Patriots. There was a wide range of activities in which the Israelis quietly engaged during the war. These activities included such areas as intelligence, military techniques and Israeli-developed weaponry, the use of Haifa for port calls and R and R, and medical support.

The problem is that the Bush administration does not want to accept the fact of Israel as a strategic asset. The Pentagon has. Look at its use of Israeli-made drones, mobile bridges and other systems, its appreciation of Israel's desert warfare experiences, its

understanding of Israel's utility in the Mediterranean, prepositioning of American weaponry on Israeli soil, Israeli upgrading of older American weapons (which becomes very important when trying to decrease the American defense budget), or the development of the Arrow anti-missile missile. Whether one looks at Israel as a backup vis-a-vis Europe or vis-a-vis the Persian Gulf, Israel is critically situated. It is a complete misconception to think that with the end of the Cold War Israel is no longer significant to American strategic interests.

There had been two schools of thought among those who advocated Israel as a strategic asset. One school held that Israel was of primary significance vis-a-vis the Soviet Union, an idea which is clearly obsolete today. The other school held that Israel was important as a bastion of pro-Americanism in the Middle East, not only vis-a-vis the Soviet Union but in many other important aspects, and that it would be hard to imagine as strong an American position in the region without Israel as a kind of reserve. This school of thought has been strengthened by the Persian Gulf war.

To conclude, basic international conditions are working in favor of the American-Israeli relationship, with the end of the Cold War and both parties on the same winning side in the Persian Gulf war. Yet the state of their two societies--in the United States the sense of weakness and domestic inwardness, contrasted with the security problems and triumphalism that Israel faces--moves the two sides in exactly opposite directions. These social differences could be overcome if the leadership in the two countries were compatible, but since they are not, the prognosis for American-Israeli relations in the near future is poor. Perhaps if this American administration was more skillful in understanding that the way to gain concessions from Israelis is to build confidence between the United States and Israel, and if it were more prepared to confront the Arabs in order to gain concessions from the Arab states, then it might be more effective with the Israelis. As it happens, this is a very tough Israeli government when it comes to concessions, and a very tough American administration when it comes to Israel. The Bush administration is likely to be reelected in 1992. The old notion of election years being easy times for Israel is not likely to apply. Therefore, the immediate future will probably bring a difficult period in American-Israeli relations as we approach the 1992 election year in both the United States and Israel.

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