

Fateful Triangle

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The United States, Israel, and the Palestinians
Updated Edition

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Fanning the Flames

In the war of words that has been waged since Israel invaded Lebanon on June 6, 1982, critics of Israeli actions have frequently been accused of hypocrisy. While the reasons advanced are spurious,* the charge itself has some merit. It is surely hypocritical to condemn Israel for establishing settlements in the occupied territories while we pay for establishing and expanding them. Or to condemn Israel for attacking civilian targets with cluster and phosphorus bombs “to get the maximum kill per hit,”² when we provide them gratis or at bargain rates, knowing that they will be used for just this purpose.³ Or to criticize Israel’s “indiscriminate” bombardment of heavily-settled civilian areas or its other military adventures,⁴ while we not only provide the means

* Through the summer of 1982, the media were flooded with letters of a strikingly similar format, typically asking of critics: “Where were you when...?,” where the gap is filled by the writer’s favorite Palestinian atrocity, often invented. Another typical format was the accusation that it is hypocritical to criticize Israeli atrocities unless one goes on to condemn the Russians in Afghanistan, the Syrians for the terrible massacre in Hama, etc. No similar requirements were imposed when the PLO was bitterly condemned for terrorist atrocities. In fact, it has been a common pretense that the media and others had *not* condemned PLO atrocities or even that the media have been “pro-PLO” (e.g., Leon Wieseltier: “There is a scandal, and it is the moral and political prestige of the PLO [in media] coverage of the Middle East”). Entering still further into the world of fantasy, we even find the charge (Robert Tucker) that “numerous public figures in the West, even a number of Western governments” (all unnamed) have “encouraged the PLO in its maximalist course” of “winner-take-all,” i.e., destruction of Israel.¹ When the intellectual history of this period is someday written, it will scarcely be believable.

in abundance but welcome Israel's assistance in testing the latest weaponry under live battlefield conditions—to be sure, against a vastly outmatched enemy, including completely undefended targets, always the safest way to carry out experiments of this sort. In general, it is pure hypocrisy to criticize the exercise of Israeli power while welcoming Israel's contributions towards realizing the U.S. aim of eliminating possible threats, largely indigenous, to American domination of the Middle East region.

Clearly, as long as the United States provides the wherewithal, Israel will use it for its purposes. These purposes are clear enough today, and have been clear to those who chose to understand for many years: to integrate the bulk of the occupied territories within Israel in some fashion while finding a way to reduce the Arab population; to disperse the scattered refugees and crush any manifestation of Palestinian nationalism or Palestinian culture;⁵ to gain control over southern Lebanon. Since these goals have long been obvious and have been shared in fundamental respects by the two major political groupings in Israel, there is little basis for condemning Israel when it exploits the position of regional power afforded it by the phenomenal quantities of U.S. aid in exactly the ways that would be anticipated by any person whose head is not buried in the sand. Complaints and accusations are indeed hypocritical as long as material assistance is provided in an unending and ever-expanding flow, along with diplomatic and ideological support, the latter, by shaping the facts of history in a convenient form. Even if the occasional tempered criticisms from Washington or in editorial commentary are seriously intended, there is little reason for any Israeli government to pay any attention to them. The historical practice over many years has trained Israeli leaders to assume that U.S. "opinion makers" and political elites will stand behind them whatever they do, and that even if direct reporting is accurate, as it generally is, its import will gradually be lost as the custodians of history carry out their tasks.

The basic point seems simple enough, and is well-understood outside the United States, including Israel. A dissident Israeli journalist observes that "All this delusion of imperial power would stop

if the United States turned off the tap ...in anger at some excessive lunacy.”⁶ The London *Economist* comments:

Holding up the supply of shiny new weapons is America’s traditional slap on Israel’s wrist. But an embargo is ineffective unless it is certain to last...Much more effective would be the belief in Israel that this time an American president will stick with his policy, including if need be a lasting embargo on arms and a rethink of the extent of America’s aid.⁷

The point, as noted, seems simple enough. Some years ago it was in fact as simple as it seems. It would then have been possible to influence Israel to join in the international consensus—which has long included the major Arab states, the population of the occupied territories, and the mainstream of the PLO—in support of a two-state political settlement that would include recognized borders, security guarantees, and reasonable prospects for a peaceful resolution of the conflict. The precondition, of course, was for the U.S. itself to join this consensus and cease its support for the adamant rejectionism of the Labor Party and then Menachem Begin’s Likud coalition. Though this picture of recent history is remote from the standard version here, it is familiar abroad, and has the additional merit of accuracy.⁸

What seemed simple several years ago, however, has become considerably more complex today. By now it is not at all clear what the effect would be if U.S. policy were to shift towards the international consensus, abandoning the commitment to a Greater Israel that will dominate the region in the interests of American power—a commitment that is expressed in deeds, whatever the accompanying words may be—and terminating its immense material, diplomatic and ideological contributions towards ensuring that the quite reasonable international consensus will not be realized. The question is of no small significance. I will return to the background, the issues, and the current prospects.

What follows is not intended as a comprehensive review or analysis of the network of relations among the United States, Israel and the Palestinians. Rather, its more modest aims are to bring out certain elements of the “special relationship” between the United

States and Israel, and of their relationships to the original inhabitants of the land, which I think have been insufficiently appreciated or addressed and often seriously misrepresented, with the consequence that we have pursued policies that are both disgraceful and extremely dangerous, increasingly so.

These remarks will be critical of Israel's policies: its consistent rejection of any political settlement that accommodates the national rights of the indigenous population; its repression and state terrorism over many years; its propaganda efforts, which have been remarkably successful—much to Israel's detriment in my view—in the United States. But this presentation may be misleading, in two respects. In the first place, this is not an attempt at a general history; the focus is on what I think is and has been wrong and what should be changed, not on what I think has been right.* Secondly, the focus on Israeli actions and initiatives may obscure the fact that my real concern is the policies that have been pursued by the U.S. government and our responsibility in shaping or tolerating these policies. To a remarkable extent, articulate opinion and attitudes in the U.S. have been dominated by people who describe themselves as "supporters of Israel," a term that I will also adopt, though with much reluctance, since I think they should more properly be called "supporters of the moral degeneration and ultimate destruction of Israel," and not Israel alone. Given this ideological climate and the concrete U.S. actions that it has helped to engender, it is natural enough that Israeli policies have evolved in their predictable way. Perpetuation of these tendencies within the U.S. and in U.S.-Israel relations portends a rather gloomy future, in my view, for reasons that I hope will become clearer as we proceed. If so, a large measure of responsibility lies right here, as in the recent past.

* One of the things that is right is the Hebrew-language press, or at least, significant segments of it. I have relied extensively on the work of thoughtful and courageous Israeli journalists who have set—and met—quite unusual standards in exposing unpleasant facts about their own government and society. There is nothing comparable elsewhere, in my experience. See also *TNCW*, p. 450 (see note 5); Roben Friedman, "The West Bank's brave reporters," *Middle East International*, March 4, 1983. I am indebted to several Israeli friends, primary among them Israel Shahak, for having provided me with a great deal of material from these sources, as well as much insightful comment.

The essential features of the U.S. contribution towards the creation of a Greater Israel were revealed in a stark and brutal form in the September 1982 massacre of Palestinians in Beirut, which finally did elicit widespread outrage, temporarily at least. I will return to the events and their background later. For now, it suffices to observe that the Israeli invasion of Lebanon was supported by the U.S. and by editorial comment generally, though qualms were raised when it seemed to be going too far (perhaps threatening U.S. interests) or to involve too many civilian casualties. All of this is reminiscent of the U.S. attack on South Vietnam in 1962, then most of Indochina a few years later, to mention an event that did not take place according to standard U.S. journalism and scholarship, just as official Party history recognizes no such event as the Russian invasion of Afghanistan in 1979.

The Israeli occupation of West Beirut on September 15 also elicited no official U.S. criticism, though the Sabra and Shatila massacres that followed aroused angry condemnation. The condemnation was directed in the first place at the Christian Phalange, which was accused of the actual massacre, and in the second place at the Government of Israel, for failing in its responsibility to protect the inhabitants of the camps. A flood of letters and articles in the press contrasted Begin's reliance on force and violence, his deception, his high-handed rejection (at first) of an official inquiry, and his efforts to evade responsibility, with the stand of the opposition Labor Party both now and when it had held power. The "beautiful Israel" of earlier years was disappearing, because of Begin and Sharon.

Col. Eli Geva, who had been dismissed from the IDF* after refusing to lead his troops against West Beirut, was quoted as saying:

The feeling is that the house is on fire. I am referring to a country which is in a type of deterioration, or landslide, and everyone who believes in this country, has to contribute to stopping the landslide.⁹

Many agreed, specifically, many long-time supporters of Israel (in the special sense of the term mentioned earlier), who dated the deterioration from the invasion of West Beirut, or of Lebanon, or per-

* Israel Defense Forces; the army of the State of Israel.

haps somewhat earlier, though surely after Begin took power.

Within Israel, the Beirut massacre evoked much anguish and an unprecedented wave of protest against the government, including an immense popular demonstration, backed, for the first time, by the opposition Labor Party. There was, however, little evidence of any significant loss of support for Begin and his governing Likud coalition. The strong and often passionate support for the military operation in Lebanon on the part of the majority of the population also appears to have been unaffected by the massacre, though opposition grew in the following months as the costs began to mount.

The response in the U.S. was interesting. After initial sharp condemnation, the general reaction, across quite a broad spectrum, was that the events and the reaction to them highlighted the uniquely high moral standards of Israel. A *New York Times* editorial commented that Israel's anguish "is only appropriate for a society in which moral sensitivity is a principle of political life." Even in journals that are often regarded as taking a critical stance towards Israel, similar sentiments were voiced. *Time*, for example, commenting on protests within the IDF, wrote that it "has from the start been animated by the same righteous anger and high moral purpose that has guided Israel through its tumultuous history."¹⁰ When the Report of the Israeli Commission of Inquiry into the massacres appeared a few months later, commentary was rhapsodic: Israel had sought and attained "salvation"; its achievement was "sublime" (see pp. 461).

No state in history merits such accolades; such comments would be dismissed with contempt with reference to any other state (apart from one's own, in patriotic speeches or the more dismal segments of scholarship). But with reference to Israel such references are so commonplace as to pass without notice, quite across the board in American journalism and scholarship, with rare exceptions. In contrast, the Palestinians and their organizations, and the Arabs more generally, have been portrayed in terms of violence, terrorism, irrationality, and uncompromising refusal to come to terms with the existence of Israel or to accept the norms of decent behavior. The contrast is clear enough in journalism and scholarship, and it is also familiar in stan-

dard media fare, where the Arab terrorist is routinely contrasted with the heroic Israeli. It would, for example, be inconceivable for a TV drama to portray an Israeli or Jewish character in the manner of the standard Arab villain, despite the ample record of Israeli terrorism over many years, effectively concealed in the United States.

Colonel Geva's comment, cited above, may well be accurate, but the question of timing is of some significance, as is the stance—both current and historical—of the Labor Party that dominated the pre-state Zionist movement and ruled from the establishment of the state to 1977. This is a question that will be addressed below. The record shows quite clearly, I believe, that it is a serious error to attribute the deterioration to Begin's Likud coalition. The house was on fire long before, and supporters of Israel have been fanning the flames, a fact long deplored by many true Israeli doves. Those who have watched the "landslide" in silence, or have helped it along, or have successfully concealed it by often vulgar apologetics, or have blamed the Palestinians when they are persecuted or killed in alleged "retaliations," have laid the groundwork for the current conflagration, and for the atrocities in Beirut that finally evoked some temporary protest. The reasons for this judgment will appear as we proceed.

It would be salutary, then, to abandon hypocrisy. Either we provide the support for the establishment of a Greater Israel with all that it entails and refrain from condemning the grim consequences of this decision, or we withdraw the means and the license for the pursuit of these programs and act to ensure that the valid demands of Israelis and Palestinians be satisfied. This can, perhaps, still be accomplished, though the possibilities recede with each passing year as the Greater Israel that we are creating becomes more firmly implanted, and as its military power—now estimated to be surpassed only by the U.S., the USSR and China¹¹—continues to grow. A point of no return may soon be reached, with consequences that may be appalling for Israel and the Palestinians, for the region, and perhaps for the entire world.

2

The Origins of the “Special Relationship”

1 Levels of Support: Diplomatic, Material, Ideological

The relationship between the United States and Israel has been a curious one in world affairs and in American culture. Its unique character is symbolized by recent votes at the United Nations. For example, on June 26, 1982 the United States stood alone in vetoing a UN Security Council resolution calling for simultaneous withdrawal of Israeli and Palestinian armed forces from Beirut, on the grounds that this plan “was a transparent attempt to preserve the P.L.O. as a viable political force,” evidently an intolerable prospect for the U.S. government.¹ A few hours later, the U.S. and Israel voted against a General Assembly resolution calling for an end to hostilities in Lebanon and on the Israel-Lebanon border, passed with two “nays” and no abstentions. Earlier, the U.S. had vetoed an otherwise unanimous Security Council resolution condemning Israel for ignoring the earlier demand for withdrawal of Israeli troops.² The pattern has, in fact, been a persistent one.

More concretely, the special relationship is expressed in the level of U.S. military and economic aid to Israel over many years. Its exact scale is unknown, since much is concealed in various ways. Prior to 1967, before the “special relationship” had matured, Israel received the highest per capita aid from the U.S. of any

country. Commenting on the fact, Harvard Middle East specialist Nadav Safran also notes that this amounts to a substantial part of the unprecedented capital transfer to Israel from abroad that constitutes virtually the whole of Israel's investment—one reason why Israel's economic progress offers no meaningful model for underdeveloped countries.³ It is possible that recent aid amounts to something like \$1000 per year for each citizen of Israel when all factors are taken into account. Even the public figures are astounding.* For fiscal years 1978 through 1982, Israel received 48% of all U.S. military aid and 35% of U.S. economic aid, worldwide. For FY 1983, the Reagan administration requested almost \$2.5 billion for Israel out of a total aid budget of \$8.1 billion, including \$500 million in outright grants and \$1.2 billion in low-interest loans.⁴ In addition, there is a regular pattern of forgiving loans, offering weapons at special discount prices, and a variety of other devices, not to mention the tax-deductible "charitable" contributions (in effect, an imposed tax), used in ways to which we return.⁵ Not content with this level of assistance from the American taxpayer, one of the Senate's most prominent liberal Democrats, Alan Cranston of California, "proposed an amendment to the foreign aid bill to establish the principle that American economic assistance to Israel would not be less than the amount of debt Israel repays to the United States," a commitment to cover "all Israeli debts and future debts," as Senator Charles Percy commented.⁶

This was before the Lebanon war. The actual vote on foreign aid came after the invasion of Lebanon, after the destruction of much of southern Lebanon, the merciless siege and bombardment of Beirut, the September massacres, and Israel's rapid expansion of settlement in the occupied territories in response to Reagan's

* The General Accounting Office (GAO) has informed Congress that the actual level of U.S. aid may be as much as 60% higher than the publicly available figures. This is the preliminary result of a detailed study of U.S. aid to Israel by the GAO. "A major issue could develop next year [1983] over how much of the GAO study may be made public." James McCartney, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, August 25, 1982.