

Americans Shifting Against Israel? Check History

By Mitchell Bard

US support for Israel was far more strained in 1982 than today.

One of the reasons reporters covering the Middle East get the story wrong so consistently is that they believe that history begins with their arrival on the scene. This is evident again in the numerous reports about US support, particularly within the Democratic Party, shifting away from Israel. A trip down memory lane might put the situation in context.

In June 1982, Israel invaded Lebanon. The reasons were the buildup of PLO forces and their terrorist attacks on Israel. Numerous members of Congress supported Israel's decision but not all. Four Republicans, Rep. Paul Findley (IL), Rep. Toby Roth (WI), Sen. Charles Mathias (MD), and Sen. Mark Hatfield (OR) condemned the invasion, and Roth and Hatfield called for the suspension of aid to Israel. After Israel surrounded Beirut, Sen. Jesse Helms (R-NC) said the United States should break relations with Israel if it didn't ease pressure on the city. Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, he said, "must stop this business because the American people find repugnant the continuation of the destruction ... and killing of innocent people."

Republican support for Israel was not yet universal in 1982, when Reps. Paul Findley (left) and Paul McCloskey (right) sponsored a resolution suspending arms sales to Israel.

A bipartisan resolution sponsored called for a suspension of arms sales and deliveries to Israel, and an investigation into whether US military equipment was used for "aggressive purposes" in violation of US law. It was sponsored by Republicans Findley and Paul McCloskey (CA) as well as Democrats Nick Joe Rahall (WV), George Crockett (MI), Gus Savage (IL), David Bowen (MS), Walter Fauntroy (Washington, DC), Mervyn Dymally (CA), John Conyers (MI), and Mary Rose Oaker (OH). John Glenn (D-OH) also criticized Israel's use of US weapons. Sen. Paul Tsongas (D-MA) condemned Israel's invasion and said, "Begin and [Israel Defense Minister Ariel] Sharon have led Israel to lose its innocence." He later found a meeting with Begin distressing because the prime minister said he would never negotiate with PLO chief Yasser Arafat.

Yes, folks, there was a "squad" of anti-Israel members, even larger than today's, back in the 1980s (and before).

By contrast, Sen. Joseph Biden (D-DL) was among 43 senators who called for the elimination of the PLO threat to Israel.

AIPAC's Near East Report noted, "It is evident that the harsh criticism of Israel's move into Lebanon which has surfaced in Congress, the press, and elsewhere, arises far less from Israel's

manifest and recognized, right to defend itself against PLO terrorism - than from the widespread reports of massive civilian casualties in Lebanon." With regard to those reports, the newsletter asked, "Why is it that decisive elements of world opinion are ever ready ... to accept as gospel the claims of anti-Western, Soviet-allied Arab sources which are notoriously given to wild exaggeration and distortion of truth?" For today, replace anti-Western, Soviet-allied with Hamas and Iran-allied.

Is there any similarity to President Biden pressuring Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for a ceasefire and speaking about the rights of both Israelis and Palestinians?

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Ronald Reagan was arguably the most pro-Israel president in history; nevertheless, he was angered by Israel's actions in Lebanon and distrusted Begin (compare with Biden saying Netanyahu has "never broken his word to me"). After the media reported Israeli warplanes bombarded Beirut and killed more than 300 people, Reagan called Begin and "expressed his outrage" at Israeli attacks, and the "needless destruction and bloodshed." The White House said, "The President made clear that it is imperative that the cease-fire in place be observed absolutely in order for negotiations to proceed." An aide said Reagan's call was "his toughest yet - he used frank and straightforward language."

Sound familiar?

Reagan's equally pro-Israel Secretary of State George Shultz said "of the nations of the world which need and deserve peace, Israel surely holds a preeminent place." Echoing Biden, he added, "of the peoples of the world who need and deserve a place with which they can truly identify, the Palestinian claim is undeniable."

What about the media coverage?

Norman Podhoretz condemned the "explosion of invective against Israel" in the US media in a September 1982 essay.

In a classic response to the reaction to the Lebanon War everyone should read, Norman Podhoretz wrote in "J'Accuse" that "according to one estimate, of the first 19 pieces on the war in Lebanon to appear on The New York Times Op-Ed page, 17 were hostile to Israel and only two (one of them by me) were sympathetic." He lamented that "not only did the kind of virulent pieces formerly confined to the Village Voice and other yellow journals of the Left and Right increase in number and intensity; such pieces now also began appearing regularly in reputable papers and magazines."

Podhoretz cited the example of

Edward Said, who wrote in the Times that Sidon and Tyre had been "laid waste, their civilian inhabitants killed or made destitute by Israeli carpet bombing." Said accused Israel of pursuing "an apocalyptic logic of exterminism."

A Times editorial said, "Israel is probably wrong to believe that it can long cripple PLO forces," and that Israel will pursue policies of "buying time and breathing space by means that inflict new wounds of Arab grievance."

In an open letter to Menachem Begin, Washington Post columnist Mary McGrory compared Israel's actions in Lebanon to the dropping of the atom bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and asked:

Does Israel's security have to be purchased by the slaughter of innocents? ... We have been seeing every night pictures of wounded babies and old men. We read about people standing outside devastated apartment buildings, wearing masks against the stench of corpses, waiting to go in to claim their dead. They were a threat to you? Yes, we know, your planes dropped leaflets before they dropped the bombs. But why did you have to bomb their cities at all? People in apartment buildings may be PLO sympathizers or even devoted adherents of Yasir Arafat. But they were unarmed civilians.

Numerous writers compared Israelis to Nazis. Washington Post editor Meg Greenfield objected to such rhetoric but thought the "outraged, emotional condemnations of what Israel is doing" was appropriate.

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Columnist Richard Cohen wrote in the Post, "Maybe the ultimate tragedy of the seemingly nonstop war in the Middle East is that Israel has adopted the morality of its hostile neighbors. Now it bombs cities, killing combatants and non-combatants alike - men as well as women, women as well as children ..."

Journalist Nicholas von Hoffman found a positive angle to the war, "Where before it was difficult to print or say anything that was critical of Israeli policies and practices, the barriers are now coming down."

The New York Times did question the double standard applied to Israel: "Why is it wrong for Israel to threaten tens of thousands in west Beirut to get at a few thousand remaining PLO fighters - but not wrong for those fighters to hide in civilian neighborhoods, using innocent people as hostages?"

There was no CNN, Fox or MSNBC back then, but there were the major networks. NBC's John Chancellor, for example, criticized Israel for "trying to buy a few years of peace at a terrible human and political cost" while

"making the American policy in the Middle East a shambles." In a later commentary, he said, "we are now dealing with an imperial Israel."

And how's this for irony? Wolf Blitzer wrote in the Near East Report: "Israel's honeymoon with the American news media - if there ever was one - is today clearly over. Coverage of Israel in recent years has become more harsh."

How about anti-Israel propaganda?

The wife of the Saudi ambassador to the United States created the Arab Women's Council to tour the United States to tell the "Palestinian side" of the conflict. Their message, Near East Report said, could be summed up in the headline of full-page advertisements the council-sponsored, "Begin's Holocaust in Lebanon."

Twenty-three influential Palestinians met in London and agreed to allocate \$100 million on propaganda in the United States focused on "the Palestinian peoples' rights."

On campus, the SJP of its day - the General Union of Palestinian Students, a group linked to the murderous PLO - was expected to sponsor speaking tours for anti-Israel propagandists and anti-Zionist Jews. Elmer Berger was one of them. His American Jewish Alternatives to Zionism organization was akin to Jewish Voice for Peace and IfNotNow.

At a debate sponsored by the Amherst College Alumni Association, former US ambassador to Syria Talcott Seelye called Israel's Minister of defense Ariel Sharon a "Nazi stormtrooper" who seeks a "final solution in the Middle East."

What about a schism in the Jewish community?

Podhoretz noted that "a number of American Jews have been adding their own special note to the whining chorus of anti-Israel columnists, State Department Arabists, and corporate sycophants of Saudi Arabia which has grown more raucous over Lebanon than ever before." As a result, he said:

"The misleading impression has been created that these 'dissenters' reveal a serious split within the American Jewish community over Israel. In fact, however, with a few notable exceptions, they represent the same minority of roughly 10 or 15 percent which has all along either opposed Israel ... or else came to support Israel grudgingly and only on condition that it comports itself in accordance with their political ideas. It is these people who have lately been congratulating themselves on their courage in 'speaking out' against Israel."

As Yogi Berra would say, "It's like déjà vu all over again."

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