

The Iraqi Conflict: Its Impact on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

by
Eric Rouleau

There is a widespread belief in the Arab world – and in western pro-Palestinian circles – that there is a strong Israeli connection to the invasion of Iraq and, more generally, to American policies in the Middle East. Such a conviction is based more on prejudice than on facts. It is widely assumed that the political interests of the United States and Israel are the same with regards to the Middle East and that the hard-line pro-US Jewish faction led by Sharon represents the views of “the Jewish community” both within Israel and within the world at large. In actuality, however, the relationship between the United States and Israel, and the connection between the Iraqi conflict and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is extremely complex. In place of the gross distortions that have permeated popular discourse on the subject, I seek to present a more accurate, multi-faceted view of the relationship between the Iraqi conflict and that of Israel-Palestine. By clearly defining the roles and interests of the various actors involved I hope to move beyond generalizations to form a clearer conceptualization of the way the conflicts overlap and the reasons why they do so.

US Ambition and the Iraqi Conflict

The United States has been acting as an empire with imperial ambitions for quite some time, certainly long before President Bush II came to power. The administrations of Bush I and Bill Clinton functioned according to the same imperial logic that guides the current Bush administration; the current administration is set apart from its predecessors only by its commitment to use force to achieve its global ambitions. This difference is to be explained by the fact that President Bush II and his Republican Party represent the interests of the neo-conservatives, who will do whatever it takes to achieve their goals. The ideology of these neoconservatives is based on an objective fact: since the disappearance of the Soviet Union, the United States is the sole world super-power which has the capacity—economic, financial, political,

and military—to exercise global power. The neo-cons seek to use the reality of American strength to establish American hegemony.

The invasion of Iraq plays a crucial role in the agenda of the neoconservatives. Iraq has the second largest oil reserves in the world. It could replace, in case of need, other producers such as Saudi Arabia, a fragile ally of the United States. The control of oil production and prices gives the United States potential power to pressure consumer states such as Russia, China, and many in Western Europe. As early as 1997, the neo-conservatives recommended that no industrial power—besides the United States—should be allowed to play any role on the international oil scene. They were aware of the importance of oil and it was clear that they intended to dominate the world oil market.

In addition to the control of Iraqi oil, the US invasion provides other benefits to the neo-conservatives. The establishment of military bases in Iraq consolidates America's hegemony in the gulf region, central Asia, and beyond. In addition, it is assumed that the "democratization" of the Middle East, which will include regime changes if necessary, will destroy the bases of terrorism and create a better environment for countries allied to the United States. These friendly states would make peace with Israel even if the Palestinian problem had yet to be solved. Israel, America's surrogate state in the Middle East, would then be given a dominant role in the region.

In terms of domestic politics, the invasion of Iraq allows the neoconservatives an opportunity to entice much of the Jewish vote away from the Democratic Party. The invasion has also strengthened the ties between the Republican Party and millions of sympathizers of the Christian right, thereby achieving two, seemingly contradictory goals, at once. The invasion of Iraq allows the neo-conservatives to consolidate their power both at home and abroad, bringing them ever closer to their goal of global hegemony. Within the context of US interest is the United States' relationship with Israel best understood. Most of the neo-conservatives are right wing Zionists – sometimes more to the right than Ariel Sharon – who believe that peace should be imposed on the Palestinians, a peace which would be acceptable to the expansionist rulers of Israel. This "peace" would form a small part of the wider US strategy for dominance, which includes the so-called democratization of Iraq, followed by regime change in Syria, the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon, and the destabilization of the Iranian regime, thus leading to the withdrawal of Hezbollah from Israel's borders. The

dramatic change in the regional balance of power would then bring about the desired pax Americana.

Given US priorities, it should be clear that a strong Israel is desirable in so far as – and only insofar as -- it will aid the United States in its quest for power. Because the US is not interested in Israel for its own sake, Israel often does not take priority: in its battle against terrorism, the US chose to invade Iraq rather than to solve the Israel-Palestinian problem, even though involving itself in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict would have been the more logical and obvious choice. Let there be no confusion on this point: Israel is the satellite of the United States, not the other way around.

Israel, “the Jews,” and the United States

IT IS A COMMON MISPERCEPTION THAT ISRAEL’S RELATIONSHIP with the United States is inherently symbiotic. In reality, Israel often pays a high price for its ties to the United States. Recently, the perceived connection between the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Iraqi conflict has inflicted great harm on Israel, the Jews, and the peace process. International public opinion hostile to the invasion of Iraq, especially in the Arab world and in Europe, make little distinction between Bush’s United States and Sharon’s Israel. In most, if not all demonstrations, slogans are hostile to both Israel and the US, as both are accused of war mongering. A poll organized by the European Union last November indicated that 59% of the citizens of Europe considered Israel to be the greatest threat to world peace and stability – greater than the United States, North Korea or Iran. Undoubtedly this negative view is to be partly attributed to the behavior of the Israeli army in the occupied territories. Yet, this is a relatively new phenomenon in Europe and one that should be noted: pro-Palestinian sympathies are becoming more widespread than support for Israeli policies.

The war in Iraq is also seen by many as a worldwide Jewish conspiracy. The government of Israel and Jewish organizations supporting it are partly responsible for this anti-Semitic perception. Israel has always presented itself as the representative of the whole Jewish people, including those in the Diaspora. Organizations of the Jewish establishment around the world who have adopted a hard-line attitude towards the conflict also pretend to speak for the Jews in their respective countries. Unfortunately, the hard-liners have convinced most of the world, and especially the Arab world, that they

represent the “Jewish community” as a whole. If we are to more accurately understand the connection between the Iraqi conflict and that of Israel-Palestine, we must disentangle the facts from the distortions and recognize the variations of thought and belief that exist within and between the Jewish communities. On the issue of the US invasion of Iraq, it should be noted that the Israeli government did not represent even the Israeli people as a whole. According to one poll taken on the eve of the Iraqi war, public opinion was evenly split: 46% in favor of the American-led war and 43% against a war undertaken without international legitimacy. Furthermore, on 15 February of last year, both Palestinians and Israelis demonstrated against Bush and Sharon, along with millions of others in 600 cities around the globe.

Similarly, Jewish establishment organizations in various countries do not represent all of their Jewish countrymen. These affluent, powerful lobbies are unconditionally supportive of the Israeli state and attempt to stifle dissenting opinion by labeling those openly critical of Israeli policies as “self hating” Jews.

The role of the Jewish lobby in the United States is further complicated by the fact that it must ally itself with the Christian fundamentalists if it is to have the influence it desires. On its own, the Jewish lobby in the US is not as efficient as it is said to be. The Christian fundamentalists, who are heavily represented within Congress and the Bush administration, are much more influential. Together with the neo-conservatives, Jewish or not, they have played and continue to play a major role in the state’s decision-making process. The Jewish lobby is not proud of its alliance with the Christian fundamentalists, who are not only expansionist Zionists but who are also implicitly anti-Semitic.

Indeed, there is no one “Jewish community” to speak of, only fragmented, dissenting communities with different interests and different alliances. Though this should be an obvious point, distortions and misperceptions about Israel and the Jews have become so commonplace that common sense and rational critique have been discarded in favor of simple, sweeping generalizations.

The Impact of the 2004 Election on the Middle East

LATELY THE BUSH ADMINISTRATION HAS NOT MADE AS MUCH progress on the path towards global hegemony as it would like. Unforeseen obstacles, such as the degree of patriotism and anti-American sentiment in Iraq, international criticism, and domestic unease threaten the Bush project with total collapse. There is a very real chance that Bush could be defeated in the November election. What will be the impact of the election on the Middle East? If Bush is reelected he will probably not change his attitude towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He may alter his approach in order to reduce Arab hostility to his policies, but not enough to bring about a settlement.

The election of John Kerry to the White House would deprive Israeli expansionists of the unconditional support of the United States. A constructive dialogue would become unavoidable between Washington and Israeli moderates. However, John Kerry, in line with the traditional policy of the Democratic Party, will avoid confrontation with the current Israeli government. Kerry will adopt a Clinton-like approach only if a new majority is elected in Israel that is favorable to a just peace with the Palestinians. If this were to occur, Kerry would benefit from the full support of the European Union.

No matter how strong the relationship between the United States and Israel may become, its fundamental basis will not change: US interests and the US vision of global hegemony will dictate the terms of its existence. For this reason, if for no other, Israel cannot rely on the United States to solve its problems. Indeed, neither the Israelis nor the Palestinians should look to foreign powers for the solution of their conflict. It is only when they agree on the basics of a settlement that they will obtain the outside support they need. This is why the peace movements in both communities have a historic mission to accomplish, and this is why they need badly the solidarity and the support of all peace-loving organizations around the world.

This article is based on a talk given at the Third International Conference On a Just Peace in Israel Palestine at the Université Libre de Bruxelles, Belgium in July 2004.