

Taking on Israeli-Palestinian Impasse

The Egyptian military has ousted President Morsi and Syria is in a civil war, but Secretary of State Kerry has invested much of his time on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Some pundits question Kerry's priorities but they ignore how corrosive the Israeli occupation has been to U.S. interests, says ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

Mark Landler and Jodi Rudoren in the *New York Times* raise the question of whether Secretary of State John Kerry and President Barack Obama have their priorities straight regarding Middle Eastern issues when Kerry spends copious amounts of his valuable time trying to get Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations under way while other situations in the region are in flames, sometimes literally.

It is appropriate to question whether Kerry's effort is worthwhile, but not for the reasons most often mentioned. When reading in the article that "resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not the magic bullet for the region that some once thought," one has to wonder who the "some" are.

This magic bullet is a straw man. Referring to it leads to the logical fallacy, which arises all too often with this issue, that if something doesn't explain everything then it explains nothing. The unsettled Israeli-Palestinian conflict does not influence and explain everything in the Middle East, but it influences and explains a lot.

Despite all those flammable distractions elsewhere in the region, this unsettled conflict and the continued Israeli occupation of Palestinian-inhabited land continue to be one of the most frequently and widely cited causes, grievances and sources of resentment in the Middle East, and beyond, especially among Muslim populations.

Opinion polls consistently show that the issue has not lost the tremendous resonance it has had for decades. The issue also consistently is high on the list of issues that regional governments raise both publicly and in dealing with U.S. officials. And the issue is one of the most frequently mentioned complaints that extremists use to rationalize their violence. Even terrorists who may not care about the Palestinians exploit the issue's appeal.

All of this matters significantly for U.S. interests. Because of the extraordinary relationship in which the United States almost automatically

condones, defends and facilitates Israeli policies, the United States is paired with Israel as a target of anger and resentment. The extremist emphasis on Israel and the Palestinian issue points to one of the most direct and visible consequences for U.S. interests, which is to stoke or support terrorist violence against the United States.

Less visible and less traumatic are the responses of governments, which nonetheless can impede and complicate the pursuit of other U.S. objectives for which the cooperation of those governments is needed, and which is limited by the tolerance of their own populations.

Upheaval elsewhere in the Middle East, far from being unconnected to the festering conflict with Israel, is linked to it in numerous ways. As the *Times* article mentions, for example, Hezbollah cites Israel and the need to confront it as its fighters join the Syrian civil war on the side of the Assad regime.

During the two and an half years of political change in Egypt the status of the peace treaty with Israel has been an object of questioning and worry, mainly because of continued Egyptian resentment over the other half of the Camp David agreements, the part dealing with the Palestinians, never having been fulfilled.

The continued Israeli occupation is a prominent reason for skepticism and cynicism whenever the United States talks about championing political rights, the cause of democracy or national self-determination. The isolation of the United States and Israel from nearly everyone else on this issue, as reflected in many lopsided votes in the United Nations General Assembly, is also a recurring and embarrassing demonstration of a lack of U.S. power and influence.

If none of this is enough to sway one's thinking, there is the basic injustice of the occupation. And for those who profess love for Israel and whose formula for deciding Middle East policy is to ask what is in Israel's interest, there is something else to think about: what Israel's future will look like as an increasingly beleaguered, perpetually at war, apartheid state if the conflict with the Palestinians is never resolved.

Former Israeli Ambassador to the United States Sallai Meridor is cited in the article as saying that most Israelis would rank Syria, Iran, Egypt and Jordan ahead of the Palestinians in "importance and urgency."

This overlooks two distinctions. One is between importance and urgency, which are two different things. The depressing familiarity into which the unresolved Israeli-Palestinian seems to have settled after 46 years of occupation does not, through that passage of time, make it any less important.

Another distinction that is critical for U.S. policy is between what is

important and what the United States can do anything about. The United States has the leverage, so far unrealized, to do a lot about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, given the extraordinary diplomatic and material largesse it bestows on Israel.

By contrast, there is much less it can do about some of those other problems in the Middle East. Without obvious levers to pull, efforts to do something are less likely to solve problems than to exacerbate them or to incur additional resentment against the United States for trying to manipulate someone else's internal affairs.

That doesn't stop many American participants in policy debates, of course, from pretending that the United States really can solve some of those problems. And so we get the pressure that resulted in indirect intervention in the Syria civil war that is likely to fan the flames there without getting closer to a settlement. We also get recommendations for the United States to declare "redlines" to get Egyptians to behave. ("Redlines" ought to be banished from the vocabulary of policy discourse.)

The valid basis for questioning whether the Secretary of State is making good use of his time is this: suppose Mr. Kerry somehow manages to get Israeli and Palestinian representatives to sit at the same table and to engage in a dialogue that is called a negotiation, then what? Will there be reason to believe that this will be anything other than another phase in which talk goes on and on, but so does the occupation, with the Palestinians not really getting any closer to having their own state?

Unless more is done to change incentives for the Israeli government, the answer to that question is probably no. Some members of the ruling coalition in Israel have been quite outspoken in firmly opposing a relinquishing of land for peace. Meanwhile, a start to negotiations would be a public relations plus for Benjamin Netanyahu by making it slightly easier for him to pose, similar to how, to incredulous Arab ears, George W. Bush once described Ariel Sharon, as "a man of peace."

If these observations sound asymmetrically aimed at the Israeli side of the conflict, that is because the situation itself is highly asymmetrical. Israel is the occupier. The Israelis could end the occupation at any time. The Palestinians cannot.

Secretary Kerry and President Obama have their priorities straight insofar as they devote significant time and attention to trying to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. We should applaud Secretary Kerry for his energetic efforts. But we should otherwise reserve judgment until we see whether enough

else will change in U.S. policy to yield anything other than talk.

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