

Team Trump Lines Up with Israel

Israel's abuse of the Palestinians remains an open sore in the Middle East even as Israel and Team Trump try to turn everyone's attention to the red herring of Iran, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar explains.

By Paul R. Pillar

The United Nations always has had, and rightfully so, a strong role in handling the conflict between Arabs and Jews over land in Palestine. When the Ottoman Empire collapsed after World War I, Britain assumed administration of Palestine under a mandate from the League of Nations.

In the aftermath of World War II, when an overburdened Britain declared that it was ridding itself of the burden of Palestine, and with the League of Nations having died, it was appropriate that the successor international organization, the United Nations, would address the issue. A special committee of the United Nations drew up a partition plan under which Palestine would be divided into a Jewish state and an Arab state. The U.N. General Assembly approved a modified version of the plan in November 1948.

The plan was generous to the Jewish side, as reflected in heavy Zionist lobbying (especially lobbying in the United States) in favor of it, and Arab states voting against the plan in the General Assembly. Although Jews constituted only one-fourth, and Arabs three-fourths, of the population of Palestine at the time, the proposed Jewish state would get over half the land. Subsequent armed combat made the disconnect between population and land even greater. The land controlled by the Jewish state went from 55 percent of Palestine in the original plan of the UN committee, to 61 percent in the modified version that the General Assembly voted on, to 78 percent after the armistice of 1949, to 100 percent after the war that Israel initiated in 1967.

The U.N. partition plan remains Israel's founding document: an international charter for the creation of the State of Israel. This is too easily forgotten among more recent rhetoric about the United Nations being allegedly an anti-Israeli forum. The same partition plan also was a charter for creation of a Palestinian Arab state. With the subsequent events determined by Israel's superior armed might, that part of the charter has gone unrealized. It represents unfinished business. So members of the United Nations appropriately have remained, as is said in diplomatic parlance, seized of the matter.

Haley's Off-Point Comments

One continuing manifestation of remaining seized of that unfinished business is a quarterly Security Council meeting in which any U.N. member state is allowed to speak and in which the agenda item is “The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question.” Palestine has, in fact, been the prime focus of these gatherings.

But in the most recent such meeting, held last week – and with the United States chairing the Security Council this month – U.S. Ambassador Nikki Haley declared that she was going to talk not about Palestine but instead about Iran. Israeli ambassador Danny Danon, even though his country is one of the direct parties to the conflict over Palestine, eagerly devoted most of his speech to attacks on Iran.

The other participants in the debate focused more on the Palestinian problem, in accordance with the unfinished business, with traditional regional concerns, and with the published agenda item. There were, to be sure, some other criticisms of Iran, including from Iran’s local rivals in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, but even with them the problem of Palestine was not far from the surface. The Emirati representative, for example, stated that finding a resolution to the Palestinian question was a “fundamental priority” of his government, and that the UAE was deeply concerned about how the absence of a resolution was denying people in the occupied Palestinian territories their inalienable rights.

The current Israeli government repeatedly plays up the idea that with so much other turmoil in the Middle East, it is somehow not appropriate to focus international attention on the unfinished business in Palestine. The Israeli position involves not just a casting of doubt on the ability of diplomats to walk and chew gum at the same time, but also an assertion that most people in the Middle East don’t care much any more about the plight of the Palestinians. Many American sympathizers of the Israeli government speak in much the same terms and talk about insufficient ripeness in being able to do anything about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Finding Excuses

This is one of what has been a series of excuses for inaction. At other times the principal excuse may have been that there has been too much disunity on the Palestinian side for that side to produce an effective interlocutor – conveniently ignoring how Israel has done all it can to foment that disunity, even withholding tax receipts due to the Palestinian Authority when the Fatah-run P.A. has made any moves toward healing the breach with Hamas. Now the regional turmoil excuse, with that turmoil so obvious in Syria and elsewhere, has become the favored excuse *du jour*.

In a note distributed before the Security Council meeting, the United States asked countries to consider, "Who are the regional players that most benefit from chaos in the region?" One honest and accurate answer to that question would be: the Netanyahu government, because of the excuse that chaos provides in deflecting international attention and pressure away from the Israeli occupation and colonization of Palestinian territory.

The assertions about Middle Easterners no longer caring much about the Palestinian problem are simply not true, as evidenced by government statements, temperature-taking among Arab publics, and exploitation of the issue by extremist groups. Although undoubtedly there has been some diversion of attention toward other troubles, the reasons for widespread resonance of the Palestinian issue are still present. These reasons include sympathy with co-ethnics and co-religionists, a more broadly felt sense of injustice, and awareness of the destabilizing potential of letting the problem fester, including especially the extremist exploitation of the issue.

A Dormant Peace Plan

Leaders of the Arab states, in an Arab League summit meeting last month, found time to reaffirm their call for a two-state solution and their commitment to the 15-year-old Saudi-initiated peace plan that offers full and normal relations with Israel in exchange for ending the occupation of lands Israel conquered in the 1967 war. Modifications to the plan have made clear that mutually agreeable land swaps would be acceptable to the Arab governments.

The summit meeting's host, King Abdullah of Jordan, stated, "There can be no peace nor stability in the region without a just and comprehensive solution to the Palestinian cause, the core issue of the Middle East, based on the two-state solution."

In addition to whatever this reaffirmation says about the Arab regimes' walking-and-gum-chewing ability, it also puts the lie both to the notion that the region doesn't care about the Palestinian issue any more and to the notion that the Arabs are unwilling to live in peace and in a normal relationship with Israel. This fresh statement by the Arab League received far too little attention in Washington and by the Trump administration.

Last week's session at the Security Council demonstrated that, despite the efforts of Haley and Danon, people outside of their two governments really do still care a lot about the untenable and destabilizing plight of the Palestinians. The Council session, and the attempt to turn a discussion about Palestine into a discussion about Iran, also demonstrates how much the Trump administration's tortured effort to attribute all malignity in the Middle East

to Iran is motivated by the Israeli-originated use of Iran as a grand diversion.

The Israeli government's principal response whenever it begins to feel uncomfortable attention to its occupation is to declare that Iran is the "real problem" in the region and that's what people should be giving their attention to instead. The Trump administration has been following the same script. That script is not an effective way to address either actual issues with Iran or the problem of an occupation that in a few weeks will reach the half-century mark.

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Risk of Baiting Trump on His 100 Days

As President Trump reaches the 100-day mark, the liberal and mainstream criticism is that he hasn't accomplished much, but that baiting only makes Trump likely to wage more wars and push a more right-wing agenda, says Sam Hussein.

By Sam Hussein

A CNN headline blares before the end of President Trump's "First 100 Days": "Trump's race against the clock to do something." Similarly, "Democracy Now" headlines a segment: "'It Has Not Gone Well': 100 Days of President Trump and No Major Achievements."

It certainly hasn't gone well, but Trump has in fact accomplished a great deal. For one, Neil Gorsuch was put on the Supreme Court using "pro-life" rhetoric and has already facilitated death. Gorsuch provided the deciding vote in denying convicted murderer Ledell Lee's request for a DNA test to prove his innocence because Arkansas' supply of the execution drug midazolam was nearing its expiration date. Gorsuch's ascension to the high court basically consolidates rightwing control over all three branches of government.

Trump also has assembled an incredible cabinet of corporate bosses, Wall Street operators and pro-war apparatchiks. And he has adroitly broken the letter and spirit of virtually any positive promises he made to curtail U.S. interventionism and war-making around the world; to take on Wall Street; to up taxes on the wealthy; etc. He appears to be escalating Obama's war on whistleblowers to a war on publishers by threatening WikiLeaks and its founder

Julian Assange.

What are euphemistically called “flip flops” are actually betrayals of the interests of most of the people who actually voted for Trump. This is a phenomenal accomplishment for a politician to have managed in his first 100 days in office.

Like Obama before him, Trump has ensured the continued solidification of an oppressive pro-war and pro-Wall Street establishment that runs at odds to the aspirations and interests of much of the U.S. public, to say nothing of the global public. By putting forward the criticism that Trump has “no major achievements,” do alleged opponents of Trump pretend that they are helping prevent further damage by him?

Trump could be carrying out horrific policies but many media outlets would ignore the substance and focus on some dumb Trump comment, such as – stop the presses – the White House misidentified Steven Mnuchin as “commerce secretary” when he’s actually treasury secretary. They should identify Mnuchin as a Goldman Sach insider, foreclosure king, or someone whose net financial worth – estimated at \$46 million – is only a fraction of that of Wilbur Ross, the actual commerce secretary, who has \$2.5 billion.

This non-criticism of Trump will actually empower him to do more damage. The problem here is quite similar to how George H. W. Bush was depicted early in his administration by liberals: “A wimp.” The sensible media watch group FAIR even ran a piece scrutinizing the Bush administration’s attempts to refashion his public image as a “rough rider.” But this depiction of Bush as “a wimp” was even more consequential: it helped enable his use of military violence, with the invasion of Panama in 1989 and then the first attack on Iraq in 1990-91.

It’s clear that when liberal commentator Van Jones calls Trump “presidential” because the President in an address to Congress exploited the widow of a Special Forces soldier who died in Trump’s first hastily authorized military violence (a botched and bloody raid in Yemen), that the praise increased the likelihood of more violence. (Since then, Trump won widespread media praise for his hasty decision to blame Syria for the chemical-weapons incident at Khan Sheikhoun and – without United Nations or Congressional approval – rain 59 Tomahawk missiles down on Syria, reportedly killing nine civilians, including four children.)

As Trump racks up more “accomplishments” – as he and his cabal of corporate bosses cut deals with House Speaker Paul Ryan and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell – the liberal criticism of Trump “not accomplishing anything” will deserve an assist on every one of those “accomplishments.” Mission accomplished?

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