

The U.S. Role in Palestinian Self-Determination

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Many in the Arab world and amongst Palestinian leaders believe that, for the sake of even-handedness and justice, the U.S. government, a long-time supporter of Israel's security and existence, should have openly endorsed and urged others to vote for the proposition of Palestinian state recognition at the United Nations. Criticism of the U.S. failing to do so has been harsh, but it is also without perspective or historical context. What is forgotten is the persistent, even aggressive, perhaps unprecedented role that Washington has played in pushing for Palestinian rights, self-determination and, most recently, for Palestinian statehood.

American Involvement: From Nixon to Carter

Following Israel's victory in its War of Independence, U.S. presidents generally followed the thinking of George Kennan, head of what is now the Policy Planning Staff of the State Department, when he said that the U.S. should "spread responsibility for the future handling of this [Palestine] question, and divest ourselves of international leadership in the search for a solution to this problem." Presidents Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson broadly upheld this prescription by standing aloof from entering into Arab-Israel conflict mediation.

This all changed, however, beginning with President Nixon, who became involved with the Arab-Israeli conflict for two reasons. First, Egyptian President Anwar al-Sadat was fixated on restoring the Sinai to Egypt, lost to Israel in the 1967 War, and was willing to turn away from the Soviet Union if the U.S. would assist in the Sinai's return. And second, at that time, Washington believed that defusing tensions in the region would keep the U.S. and Soviet Union from sliding into an unwanted confrontation there. Even so, American engagement in mediation focused on the issues between states, not Palestinian rights or aspirations. Nixon held the mistaken belief that if the U.S. engaged the PLO in diplomatic discussions, it would refrain from terrorism—this according to recently released foreign relations documents of the United States. Moreover for much of the 1970s, the Palestinian people lacked a leadership not engaged in terrorist activity or supportive of self-determination beyond the narrow elite wielding power.

The earliest known formulation by an American official about Palestinian rights occurred in March 1972. Immediately after Jordan's King Hussein announced his plan to put the West Bank with Jordan's East Bank under his control, Nixon's press secretary, Ronald A. Ziegler, said that the "United States would welcome any initiative that would meet the legitimate aspirations of the Palestinian people." And in 1975, Harold Saunders, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs, made the earliest public remark by a State Department official about Palestinian rights when, in testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Middle East, he stated that the "legitimate interests of the Palestinian Arabs must be taken

into account in the negotiation of an Arab-Israeli peace." Whether it was "legitimate aspirations" or "legitimate rights," the Nixon administration and the subsequent Ford administration publicly stipulated that the Palestinians should be part of any diplomatic solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict, setting the tone for future negotiations.

Then came President Carter. Motivated by a sense that the Palestinians were without an independent voice, Carter's foreign policy team reached out to the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), still avowedly engaged in terrorist activities against Israel with the goal of destroying the Jewish state. Reneging on a promise that the U.S. would not negotiate with or recognize the Palestinian organization, Carter sought the amendment of the PLO's opposition to Israel's existence so that it could participate in Arab-Israeli diplomacy. In March 1977, Carter said in a town hall meeting in Clinton, MA that, "there has to be a homeland provided for the Palestinian refugees who have suffered for many, many years"—an astounding statement for an American president at the time. Veteran Middle Eastern State Department hands did not comprehend why Carter would make such a statement without having received a commitment from the PLO leadership in advance.

The Palestine National Council, contemporaneously meeting in Cairo, welcomed the unprecedented public call by an American president for a political solution to the Palestinians' plight. When PLO head and known terrorist Yasser Arafat heard Carter's remarks, he reportedly "had tears in his eyes." And while Carter's outreach to the PLO failed, the president remained focused on Palestinian rights. In January 1978, he spoke of the U.S. supporting "Palestinian participation in determining their own future," and negotiated into the Camp David Accords important concepts for the Palestinians, including "the establishment of a self-governing authority...freely elected by the inhabitants of the [territories]" and that a "resolution from the negotiations must also recognize the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people and their just requirements." Documents obtained from the Israel State Archives indicate beyond any doubt that the Carter policy team at Camp David in September 1978 tried to insert additional explicit terminology into the final text of the negotiated agreement that would eventuate into a Palestinian state—upsetting Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin to such a degree that he threatened to precipitously leave those talks.

Indeed, though not as successful as it hoped for, the Carter administration's advocacy for Palestinian self-determination elevated American political support to an unprecedented proactive level.

Post-Carter Negotiations

In 1982, building on the content of the Camp David Accords, the Reagan administration issued a statement concerning the West Bank and the Palestinian political role. While it opposed a Palestinian state, the Reagan Statement expressed the desire for the Palestinians to exercise control over their future, perhaps in association with Jordan. As it read: "due consideration must be given to the principle of self-government by the inhabitants of the territories and to the legitimate security concerns of the parties involved." No Palestinian diplomatic engagement resulted from either the Camp David Accords or the Reagan Statement, however, and by the end of Reagan's second term, the Jordanians had voluntarily disassociated themselves from

considerable political and physical interest in the West Bank. In 1988, President Reagan, like Carter before him, reached out to the PLO in an attempt to find a Palestinian negotiating partner. This time, however, the organization agreed to renounce terrorism, allowing the White House to begin a dialogue and set Washington on course for its future of heavy involvement in Palestinian-Israeli negotiations. A carefully maintained U.S.-PLO dialogue emerged, until another terrorist attack against Israelis ended those official diplomatic exchanges.

In the complex and prolonged negotiations that preceded the 1991 Madrid Middle East Peace Conference, Secretary of State James Baker laboriously hammered out carefully worded invitations to all parties, including to the PLO on October 18, 1991, that endorsed "an outcome that must also provide for security and recognition for all states in the region, including Israel, and for legitimate political rights of the Palestinian people." And, of course, the negotiations that flowed from the Madrid Conference led to the secret Israeli-PLO negotiations culminating in mutual recognition and the signing of the 1993 Oslo Accords; these Accords were the administrative foundation for Palestinian control over areas of the West Bank and Gaza for the first time in history.

In 2002, after considerable efforts had been made by President Clinton to try to reconcile Palestinian and Israeli differences, President George W. Bush stipulated the most comprehensive and detailed statement for the Palestinian future when he became the first president to call for a two state solution. And then, in 2011, President Barack Obama took his predecessors' commitments one step further when he declared his support for "two states, with permanent Palestinian borders with Israel, Jordan, and Egypt, and permanent Israeli borders with Palestine." The borders, he said, should be "based on the 1967 lines with mutually agreed swaps" and the plan would be to create a "contiguous" Palestinian state, alongside Israel, a Jewish state. Never in history had a U.S. president expressed more explicit support for the Palestinian people's aspirations.

Arab Support?

Meanwhile, the Arab states have done considerably less to support the Palestinian people and with it a future state.

In 1947, Arab states vehemently opposed the creation of a Jewish state in the Middle East, not because they supported the creation of a Palestinian one, but because they hoped to incorporate the territories of the Palestine Mandate into their own borders. For Egypt and Jordan this was especially the case for most of the next four decades. The Arab League usurped Palestinian political participation in the post 1948 war diplomacy almost exclusively to prevent Jordan's Abdullah from taking any of Palestine for himself. Syria's leaders, for their part, believed the division of the Middle East after World War I into separate states, took away from Damascus what was before 1920 considered Greater Syria—Syria, Jordan, Israel, Lebanon, and parts of southeastern Turkey. In 1976, during a meeting with PLO leaders, then Syrian President Hafez al-Asad said: "Do not forget one thing: there is no Palestinian people, no Palestinian entity, there is only Syria!" And in January 1974, Sadat's Chief of Staff, when dealing with American diplomats during discussions on the disengagement agreement with Israel after the October 1973 war, said, "we sought to liberate Sinai for Egypt, we are finished with the Palestinians."

Moreover, in the aftermath of the 1948 and 1967 wars, Arab states hardly ameliorated the Palestinians' situation by incorporating the displaced persons into their countries, as many, especially Israel, were forced to do during the reshaping of the world after World War II. And more recently, Arab countries have regularly failed to assist the Palestinians financially, even after pledging large donations. According to Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas, with the exception of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, the Arab countries routinely ignore the Palestinians' requests for aid. In September 2010, Abbas noted that the PA hadn't received "one cent" of the hundreds of millions of dollars recently promised by the Arab countries.

Conversely, Washington has donated hundreds of millions of dollars to the PA directly through presidential waivers as is necessitated by U.S. law, and to Palestinians indirectly through U.S. non-governmental organizations working in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. According to the Congressional Research Service, under presidents Bush and Obama, \$800 million in waivers were issued in direct assistance to the PA. Indirectly, the U.S. aids the Palestinians with hundreds of millions of dollars annually. In fiscal year 2009 alone, the U.S. donated over \$980 million in indirect assistance, followed by nearly \$503 million in 2010 and a slightly higher amount in 2011. This does not include the hundreds of millions of dollars each year that Washington donates to UNRWA, the UN body charged with assisting Palestinian refugees in the West Bank, Gaza, and Arab countries. In fact, until the 1990s, Arab countries refused to donate to UNRWA in an effort to pressure Israel and keep the Palestinian issue front-and-center on the international agenda. Since then, most Arab states have donated to the UN agency, although the amounts usually are past due and rarely the amounts promised.

U.S. Support

Washington need not support the Palestinians' attempt at statehood at the UN to be supportive of a Palestinian state. Every American president since Nixon has, at one level or another, urged Palestinian-Israeli negotiations and agreements in the context of asserting the Palestinian prerogative to participate in determining their own future. In this way, Washington has played a uniquely incremental role in defining Palestinian self-determination and in seeking to establish a Palestinian state alongside Israel as a Jewish state. No country has spent more time, effort, and manpower in trying to resolve Arab-Israeli and Palestinian-Israeli differences; no country has chased down more funds to support Palestinian self-rule, self-government, or self-determination; indeed, no country is more prepared to configure the ground for a Palestinian state's diplomatic emergence than the U.S.

George Kennan's admonition for the U.S. to refrain from Arab-Israeli negotiations is certainly not operative today. The United States will continue pushing diplomatic agendas forward where the respective sides are asked to negotiate their own conclusions in moving the Palestinian-Israeli aspect of the conflict toward some degree of permanent resolution; Washington will continue its role as the critical choreographer in Palestinian-Israeli negotiations and it appears for now, the most salient international supporter of Palestinian political rights.

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