

Israel, United States, and the Rest of the West

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The nation-state of Israel is often seen as a product of Western imperialism in the Muslim world. It is widely suggested that the struggle for a Jewish state in the Middle East was used as a tool to perpetually cement Western hegemony in the Arab World. Garry Leech, an investigative journalist who has spent more than two decades in Colombia, Cuba, Venezuela, and Palestine (West Bank), for example, argues that the existence of Israel alludes to a continuation of colonialism in Palestine.¹ Similarly, it is emphasized that the foundations of Israel are rooted in the Western colonial project that continues to subject the Palestinian people to military occupation, land dispossession, and unequal rights.² Furthermore, contemporary pro-Palestine activists claim that Western powers are blindly complicit in the physical and metaphorical erasure of Palestinians in the occupied territories of the West Bank and in Gaza.³

While these claims hold historical relevance as underlined in this article, it is important to analyze the changing trends in Western countries' relationships with Israel. Thus, this article aims to contribute to foreign relations literature by introducing a nuanced understanding of the West's relationship with Israel by detailing the contrasting positions of the United States and Western European States with regard to Israel-Palestine. This article presents an analysis of foreign policy evidence and public polling data from different Western states, revealing a contrast in approval of Israeli policies. Moreover, this article conceptualizes "The West" as an ideological, strategic, and trans-geographic alliance of Europe and the United States.

Conceptualizing "The West" and its historical relationship with the State of Israel

After the Second World War, the prospect of Soviet expansion threatened the United States' interests in Europe, which resulted in a U.S. alliance with Western European nations. Later in 1949, this alliance materialized with the formation of NATO, a twelve-member security and geostrategic treaty committed to the idea of a "free world." The Soviets formed their own counter-alliance under the Warsaw Pact in 1955. These alliances divided Europe into two blocs: the Western bloc under the influence of the U.S. against the Eastern bloc under the influence of the Soviet Union.⁴ Simultaneously, the epochal end of the decade also marked a major change in the Arab world. In 1947, the United Nations (U.N.) adopted resolution 181 (II), formalizing the partition of Mandatory Palestine into Arab, Jewish, and International territories.

Subsequently, the Declaration of Independence of Israel on May 14, 1948, led to the first Arab-Israeli war. The end of the war made one thing clear: Israel was encircled by hostile Arab nations and thus required support from powerful states outside the Middle East. The quest of forging new relationships was also confronted by the dilemma of choosing sides in the Cold War. While Israeli leadership saw U.S. support and aid to its European allies as a lucrative opportunity, the Israeli Prime Minister, David Ben Gurion, advocated non-alignment to garner support from left-leaning Zionists and keep "all options open."⁵

In the following years, however, Israel slowly abandoned its policy of non-alignment and increasingly became “pro-West” due to the need of economic and military aid.^{5,6} By the 1950s, Israel was openly pro-West and even proposed a strategic partnership with the U.S. as its front line ally in the Middle East.

Moreover, warming relationships between the Soviet Union and Egypt under the leadership of Egyptian President Gamal Nasser also compelled Western powers to solidify their relationship with Israel. Thus, the U.S. not only increased its military support to Israel during this period but also persuaded Canada and France to follow suit.⁵ Similarly, Britain and France, the two major European powers, saw Israel as an important regional player, and forged a tripartite alliance with Tel Aviv against Egypt’s nationalization of the Suez Canal. The three countries jointly invaded Egypt in 1956, leading to the Suez Crisis.

In the following decade, Israel entered another round of confrontation with its neighboring Arab states. During the Second Arab-Israeli War of 1967, the Western powers once again supported Israel against the Arab states. Simultaneously, the Soviet’s conviction that Israeli aggression against Arabs during the war was largely driven by Western interests further polarized the crisis, making it an international issue.⁷ Moscow’s support for Arabs further cemented Israel’s relationship with the West. Similarly, when joint Egypt-Syrian forces attacked Israel in 1973 to regain their territories lost during the 1967 War, the U.S. was quick to initiate a rescue mission for their ally. This time, however, Arab States reacted by imposing an oil embargo on Western states supporting Israel in the war on October 17, 1973. Among other reasons, the embargo resulted in one of the greatest economic slumps since World War II in Western economies. Dissuaded by the oil crises and the consequent recession of 1973, NATO allies demanded that the

U.S. withdraw its support for Israel.⁸ The U.S. nevertheless continued its support unimpeded, even defying the concerns of other NATO member states.

Since then, the U.S. has largely pushed European countries to the background of the conflict. Conversely, while the European states share Washington’s conviction of Israel’s right to a peaceful existence, they have grown skeptical of Israel’s internal policies. Thus, Tel Aviv only enjoys an “ambiguous” diplomatic leverage in Europe.⁹

Israel’s Relationship with the United States—Analyzing the Past, Present, and Future

The United States’ relationship with Israel trumps its diplomatic and military support to any other country. Israel has been the largest annual recipient of direct U.S. economic and military aid since 1976, and the largest total recipient since World War II.¹⁰ Since the 1970s, Washington has vetoed more than 40 United Nations Security Council (U.N.S.C.) resolutions censuring Israel. It was only once, in 2016, when the U.S. abstained from vetoing a resolution condemning the Israeli annexation of the West Bank, allowing the resolution to pass.¹¹

Washington’s unrivaled support to Israel is also one of the primary reasons behind several territorial and diplomatic compromises Arabs have made since 1967. For example, during the Camp David Accords sponsored by the U.S. in 1978, Israel was successful in deleting the “inadmissibility of territories acquired by war” provision from Resolution 242, thus compelling Egypt to vaguely accept Israeli autonomy in the West Bank. Similarly, during Oslo I and II (1993-95), not only did the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) fully accept resolutions 242 and 338—which called for the cessation of hostilities through a ceasefire, along with the implementation of resolution 242 in all of its parts—but

also ceded much of Palestinian land to Israel. Since 1967, Israel has only relinquished its military presence from 30 percent of the Palestinian land promised in the U.N. Partition Plan of 1947.¹²

Furthermore, in the early 21st century, U.S. President George W. Bush backed the Quartet’s Road Map formulae sponsored by U.N., E.U., and Russia to end the conflict. Instead of persuading Israel to halt its settlements in the West Bank, however, Washington focused its efforts on delivering Palestinian compliance with Israel’s security demands.¹³ Under the initiative, a vote was held in Palestine to elect a new PNA governing body; however, Hamas, an Islamist liberation party, recognized by Western states as a terrorist organization, bagged the victory. As a result, when Hamas assumed office in March 2006, the U.S. ended its ties with Palestine and also persuaded other Western countries to cut off funding to the Palestinian Authority, jeopardizing the prospect of peace. Then British Prime Minister Tony Blair later regretted this decision. Blair admitted that instead of plainly boycotting under Israeli and U.S.’ insistence, the international community along with the European leadership should have persuaded the Islamist faction to be a part of the peace dialogue.¹⁴

The American relationship with Tel Aviv remained unaffected even with the arrival of a progressive president in 2009. Barack Obama actually increased military and diplomatic aid to Israel more than any of his predecessors.¹⁵ Such unrivaled leverage certainly hinted toward strong lobbying by pro-Israel organizations such as the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) and the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations in the U.S.¹⁰

Nonetheless, circumstances have changed in recent years. Polarization in U.S. politics has reshaped public perceptions of Israel. Recent studies indicate that Democratic Party supporters

are becoming increasingly skeptical of the U.S.’s unconditional support for Tel Aviv. On the contrary, Republican voters have become increasingly pro-Israel. Public polls show that only 26 percent of Democrats view the Israeli government favorably, whereas Republicans come in at 60 percent. Similarly, nearly 66 percent of Democratic voters support placing economic sanctions on Israel to curb settlements in the West Bank, while 76 percent of Republican voters think that the U.S. should “do nothing.” Polls also reveal that 48 percent of Democratic voters even support the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement against the Israeli government.¹⁶

That being said, an imminent change in U.S. policy towards Israel is not very likely. This is because of the solid diplomatic foundations forged between the two countries during the Cold War. If polarization continues, however, incoming Democrats to the White House might have to reconsider their positions under mounting public pressure.

Israel’s Relations with the “Rest of the West”: Contemporary Trends from Europe

Israel is one of the primary trade partners of the E.U. in the Middle East. The total trade between the E.U. and Israel amounted to 31 billion Euros in 2020. The E.U. has also long been supportive of Israel’s right to existence. This support is largely conditioned around the idea of a peaceful co-existence between Israel and Palestine as encapsulated in the Berlin Declaration of 1999.¹⁷ In this regard, the E.U. has pursued a policy of institutionalizing the Israel-Palestine conflict under the U.N., while opposing recent Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories.¹⁸ Similarly, it has reiterated that no Bantustan-like

arrangement which violates basic human rights shall be endorsed by the European states.

In July of last year, the foreign ministers of France and Germany, the two most influential E.U. member states, demanded that Israel halt the annexation of the West Bank.¹⁹ Subsequently, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's announcement of his plan to formally annex the Jordan Valley and parts of the West Bank elicited widespread condemnation in Europe. In Berlin, Foreign Minister Heiko Maas warned that the move would jeopardize the prospect of peace in the Arab region. Likewise, more than a thousand lawmakers in parliaments across the E.U. condemned the annexation plan in a joint letter.²⁰

Correspondingly, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson underlined that "annexation would represent a violation of international law."²¹ His words resonated with Britain's long-standing commitment to the two-state solution as a viable resolution of the conflict. There have been a number of strong voices critical of Israel's policies in the U.K. Former Foreign Secretary Jack Straw, for instance, was among the most critical voices against U.N.S.C.'s double standards regarding the condemnation of human rights violations in Israel, as opposed to those in Iraq.²² An overtly pro-Israel stance is also often met with strong criticism from the public. For example, in October 2017, U.K. Aid Minister Priti Patel had to resign over allegations of secret meetings with Benjamin Netanyahu during her visit to Israel.²³ Studies and polls show that Britons are more sympathetic toward Palestine than toward Israel.²⁴ A plurality, 38 percent to be exact, also believes that in Israel, one religious group dominates in politics and public affairs, making it an oppres-

sive democratic state.²⁵

Public polls from E.U. member states reflect similar trends. According to Pew Research, more people in major European states hold favorable views regarding Palestine than Israel.²⁶ Similarly, according to a report by the *Middle East Monitor*, nearly two-thirds of Europeans believe that Israel does not treat all religious groups equally.²⁵ They also believe that the armed Israeli response against Palestinians between 2008 and 2010 was illegal.

Differences in opinion between the U.S. and Western European states regarding Israel-Palestine reveals a failure in the argument of "Western Hegemony" to recognize European support for Palestinians. A nuanced analysis of these opposing stances indicates that European foreign policy is more in line with the two-state solution, advocated for by moderate factions of the Palestinian Authority, than with the position of the hawks in Tel Aviv. As discussed, a number of European states, along with the E.U., believe that the two-state solution is the only long-term solution for peace between Israel and Palestine.

Moreover, drawing a clear distinction between the U.S. and European states in their support for Palestinian human rights may help advocates for Palestinian rights garner public support in Europe. Consequently, if such support is achieved, it may become a potent tool against the U.S.'s burgeoning support for Israel in Western diplomatic circles. Likewise, similar diplomatic leverage may be used to lobby against Israel's illegal settlements in the West Bank. Recent trends and changing political dynamics suggest that young Democratic party voters are more likely to steer the party's position on the conflict toward Palestinian human rights.

