

Oversimplifying Israel

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Critics overstate the case that Israel is falling into international isolation.

by Peter Berkowitz



Editor's Note: This piece is based on remarks delivered on May 22, when the Center for the National Interest hosted a symposium on Jacob Heilbrunn's "Israel's Fraying Image" from the May/June issue of The National Interest. An additional response by Chas Freeman was published yesterday.

I thank Jacob Heilbrunn and Robert Merry for the lunch invitation. And I thank them for the opportunity to discuss Jacob's article, "Israel's Fraying Image," with Jacob, Charles Freeman and you all.

The National Interest has acquired a well-earned reputation for thoughtful, incisive and provocative writing about foreign affairs and national security. My friend Jacob's elegant essay is no exception.

If stated at a sufficient level of generality, I agree with Jacob's central theses:

First, Israel's reputation in the United States, Europe, and elsewhere has been damaged, and Israel must work to repair it.

Second, in an uncertain world with a rising China and a United States rethinking its international role in general and its role in the Middle East in particular, Israel must expand and diversify its friends and allies.

Third, Israel must summon the courage to take hard steps to ease the conflict with the Palestinians.

To these formulations—mine, not Jacob's, but consistent with a fair part of what he writes—I say, yes, yes and yes.

However, stated as Jacob states his main theses, I find myself often in disagreement. Jacob implies that damage to Israel's reputation comes primarily from Israel's unjust conduct. Unfortunately, Jacob leaves out of his account Israel's just conduct, and the concerted campaign of delegitimization directed against Israel by Arab states, the United Nations, and intellectuals in Europe and the United States. One could go back further than the infamous 1975 UN General Assembly Resolution declaring Zionism “a form of racism and racial discrimination” (which remained in force until its revocation by the General Assembly in 1991). More recently, the outrageous and indefensible accusations of the Goldstone report—about which I am happy to speak at length—continue to do enormous damage.

Furthermore, Jacob's concern that Israel must diversify its friends and allies proceeds from the erroneous claim that support for Israel in the United States is declining. That's incorrect. Support for Israel in the United States, according to Gallup, is “at a high water mark.”

And finally, Israel must indeed find a way to advance the peace process with the Palestinians, both because peace with the Palestinians is a vital national-security interest for Israel and because it is a matter of justice. However, no serious discussion of the peace process can take place without a proper understanding of what each side has done to advance the cause of peace and what each side has done to thwart peace. Much of Jacob's analysis reads as if the only relevant actor were Israel, and as if Israel's iniquities were the only real obstacle to peace. Such an approach feeds into the fevered accounts according to which Israel—the only fully functioning liberal democracy in Middle East, whose Arab citizens enjoy greater rights than any other Arabs in the Middle East because they enjoy all the political rights of Jewish citizens of Israel—is an arrogant, bullying, and bigoted regime that prefers the violent acquisition of territory and the despotic rule over others to peace.

It is a good rule of thumb to distrust accounts of long-standing international conflicts that assign all blame to a single side.

Unfortunately, Jacob's essay ignores the recent upheavals in the Arab world. It also ignores decades of Palestinian resistance to living in peace with a Jewish and democratic state—resistance that since Israel's founding has persisted, often taking the form of terrorism. Yet these factors are crucial to understanding Israel's conduct.

In analyzing Israel, Jacob adopts a perspective typical of university professors and elite journalists. According to the standard account—let's call it for short the progressive account, although it is adopted by some angry realists—the root of the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians is twofold: a weak or malevolent right-wing Israeli prime minister who can't or won't take the necessary steps for peace, and Israel's settlement policy beyond the Green Line, which amounts, so the charge goes, to de facto annexation of the West Bank and the denial of Palestinian self-determination.

Jacob goes so far as to conclude his essay by asserting that

Obama has it right: the chance for peace will not come from Israel's stubborn leaders, but from ordinary Israelis who force their leaders to recognize that peace must be chanced.

In Jacob's rendering of President Obama's view, there are only two relevant players: Israel's stubborn leaders and ordinary Israelis. If I were inclined to use the language of progressive academic discourse against the progressive account, I would say that Obama and Heilbrunn have obliterated Palestinian agency. Since I'm not so inclined, I instead will emphasize again that if we wish to understand the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, we must pay attention not only to what the Israelis say and do but also to what the Palestinians say and do. Moreover, as I'll suggest in a moment, Jacob misstates President Obama's view about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as if it were sharply opposed to Netanyahu's when in fact Obama's view seems to be growing closer to that of Netanyahu.

Jacob contends that the power of AIPAC is such that it requires courage to criticize Israel. However, Jacob warns, times are changing. During the president's visit to Jerusalem in March of this year, "Obama exemplified a broader phenomenon—namely, the crumbling of a longtime taboo on criticizing Israel." For authority, Jacob cites former *Salon* columnist Glenn Greenwald to the effect that the arguments of Walt and Mearsheimer, the authors of *The Israel Lobby*, have gone mainstream.

Mearsheimer and Walt like to tout their courage in speaking truth to power. Don't believe it. Never mind that Mearsheimer and Walt are and were tenured professors at elite universities. Never mind that they collected a fat advance for a book published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux, one of the nation's most prestigious publishing houses. Never mind that as proponents of the academically out-of-favor school of realism, they actually placed themselves more in harmony with the conventional academic wisdom by arguing that Israel's hardline Likud government determined American policy in the Middle East. Never mind that the Middle East Studies Association, the principal professional organization of university scholars studying the Middle East, takes an almost monolithically condemnatory stance toward Israel and has done so for

decades. Never mind that Edward Said's writings promulgating scorn for Israel have been a staple of anthropology, sociology, political theory and literature for decades.

In other words, in evaluating the significance of Mearsheimer and Walt's book, never mind that criticism of Israel—harsh, uncompromising criticism of Israel—is a staple of intellectual life in America, particularly in our universities, which reproduce the next generation's conventional wisdom. It's enough to be suspicious when intellectuals publicly trumpet their own courage. Like politicians, intellectuals are particularly inclined to confuse hard-hitting criticism—the lifeblood of public debate in a liberal democracy—with an effort to silence their opinions.

Nevertheless, Jacob argues that “the one big virtue” of the Mearsheimer and Walt argument was “to shatter the carapace of unanimity around the question of Israel's conduct.” That unanimity was a figment of Mearsheimer and Walt's imagination and Jacob is mistaken to endorse it.

To be sure, there is strong public support for Israel. Gallup, which has conducted the most opinion polls on the question of American support for Israel and has data going back to at least 1967, **finds** that current support in America for Israel has reached “a high- water mark.” According to their February World Affairs poll, Americans favor Israel over the Palestinians by a margin of 64% to 12%. Relative support for Israel has risen significantly over the last decade.

Nevertheless, Jacob is not altogether wrong about declining support for Israel. Support has clearly declined among progressives and in the Democratic Party. Like Peter Beinart, author of *The Crisis of Zionism*, Jacob conflates declining support for Israel among progressives and the Democratic Party with declining support generally.

When it comes to analyzing the jockeying for position between President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu, Jacob concludes that Obama has given Netanyahu a lesson in politics. The evidence suggests otherwise.

Jacob asserts that Obama “subtly outfoxed his detractors and adversaries, including Netanyahu” by appointing Chuck Hagel as Secretary of Defense and John Kerry as Secretary of State. That doesn't seem very crafty or subtle to me. Historically and

rightly, Congress has granted the president substantial deference to choose his team. Of greater interest is what we learn from the president's choices to head the Departments of Defense and State about the worth of his word, in particular his repeated and unambiguous declarations that the United States will not permit Iran to acquire nuclear weapons.

Surely Netanyahu—to say nothing of the behind the scenes diplomatic efforts of the Sunni Gulf Arab states who are terrified by the prospect of a nuclear Iran exercising hegemony in the Gulf—who deserves credit for pushing the president to intensify sanctions on Iran and commit the United States publicly to preventing Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons. When Obama came into office in 2009, he made clear his belief that the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians was the key to the Middle East. By the time his second term began in 2013, he seemed to be of the opinion that Iran was the decisive question. In other words, President Obama adopted Prime Minister Netanyahu's perspective, and that of the Gulf Arab states.

Jacob's analysis of the fraught relation between Obama and Netanyahu obscures the significant change in orientation displayed by Obama during his March trip to Israel.

First, Obama made evident that he realized that obstacles to achieving peace stemmed at least as much from the Palestinians as from the Israelis. Contrary to Jacob's suggestion that Israelis take American support for granted, Israelis have grown accustomed over the years to hearing reproaches and denunciations from the United States as well as from Europe—most of them to the effect that if only Israel would act decently, peace could be achieved. Obama's evenhandedness in March felt to Israelis like a warm embrace.

Second, the president indicated that Palestinians must not merely recognize Israel but recognize it as a Jewish state. Such recognition is not an empty gesture or a matter of semantics. Palestinian recognition of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state is critical because Palestinians understand that recognizing Israel as the nation state of the Jewish people effectively means waiving the Palestinians' preferred interpretation of the "right of return." According to it, approximately 5 million refugees in and out of

camps in the Gaza Strip, West Bank, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and scattered around the world would automatically be eligible to become Israeli citizens. If such a right were exercised by even a small minority, it would swamp Israel, whose total population is only about 7.7 million. Palestinian refusal to relent on the interpretation of the right of return is a major obstacle to bringing the conflict to an end.

Third, while in Jerusalem, Obama also modified the opinion he expressed in Cairo four years earlier that Israel's existence was primarily justified as a response to the horrors of the Holocaust. That opinion bolsters the Palestinian narrative holding that Israel is a colonialist enterprise, a foreign imposition on Arab lands, an act of European atonement at Arab expense for European crimes against the Jews. Instead, Obama emphasized that Israel's identity as the nation state of the Jewish people is grounded in an ancestral connection to the land that extends back thousands of years as well as in the right Jews share with other peoples of the world to be free and self-governing.

Finally, in Jerusalem the president abandoned the idea that the parties must fulfill preconditions before entering negotiations. To be sure, confidence-building measures undertaken by both sides would be most welcome. But negotiations, when begun with the proper expectations, can in themselves serve as a powerful confidence-building measure.

In conclusion: Israeli settlements are a challenge. But they are not an insuperable obstacle to the achievement of peace. Approximately 75 to 80 percent of Israelis who live beyond the Green line live on just 6 percent of the land beyond the Green line. And in 2005, Israel effected a complete withdrawal from the Gaza Strip. Bigger challenges stem from the upheavals in the Arab world—upheavals which have nothing to do with Israel or the Palestinians—and the enmity within the Palestinian ranks between the Fatah-led Palestinian Authority that governs Palestinians in the West Bank and Hamas, which rules the Gaza Strip and enjoys considerable support in the West Bank. The instability and violence all around them induces caution among Israelis. Finally, perhaps the biggest challenge arises from widespread Palestinian

incitement of hatred of Israel. This incitement is routinely promulgated by Palestinian schools and mosques; Palestinian Authority- and Hamas-run newspapers, TV, and radio; and Palestinian political leaders, including Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas, particularly when he speaks in Arabic.

In these circumstances, courage by the people of Israel and by the leaders of Israel will indeed be needed to deal with the daunting challenges Israel faces in making progress toward peace with the Palestinians.

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