

## U.S. Middle East Policy: It's More than AIPAC

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As the world approaches the 40th anniversary of the June 1967 war - and its main consequence, the ongoing Israeli Occupation of Arab territories since then the prospects are not particularly bright that the on-going crisis between Israel and the Palestinians will soon end even if some peace initiatives are currently being proposed. The toll of suffering and bitterness the occupation has taken on Palestinians and Israelis alike can hardly be measured. The gulf that has appeared between the peoples is reminiscent of what emerged in Algeria between French  *pied noirs* and the Algerian Arab and Berber peoples.

The current impasse, approaching tragic proportions after 40 years, could not exist without a persistent pro-Israel bias of every US Administration since 1967. Indeed, the level of coordination of US and Israeli policy could not be closer - be it on Israel's legacy in the West Bank and Gaza, the US-led invasion of Iraq or the possible plans to attack Iran.

Yet, this alliance is a curious thing that challenges rational political logic. Doesn't such a policy actually work *against* traditional US interests in the Middle East with its main focus on assuring oil production and transport from the Arab oil producing countries of the region? Doesn't this close US-Israeli security cooperation undermine rather than strengthen more significant American Middle East interests? Where do the Europeans, so close to the Middle East and more profoundly influenced by events there, fit in? What role might they have in reducing tensions in the region?

It is logical to conclude that *something else must be at work here to explain a policy that undermines US strategic interests*. It is easy, *perhaps too easy*, to conclude that the 'Jewish Lobby' (American Israeli Political Action Committee [AIPAC]-AJC and the like) are pulling the strings of US Middle East policy and exerting - as the expression goes 'undue influence'? The sense is that 'the tail is wagging the dog', at least some of the time. The very public and visible partisanship of these groups in support of Israel only adds to the impression.

Those who look for 'a rational explanation' of current US policy ('rational' in the sense of the traditional meaning of the term since the French Revolution) might keep in mind that *the rules of the game have changed some*. US policy today is in the hands of an *ideological administration* whose goal is to reshape the Middle East

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according to their neo-liberal political ideals. When ideological considerations conflict with rational ones (such as the US decision to invade Iraq), the ideological, dogmatic and religious factors tend to dominate. Analysts trying to understand US Middle East policy need to shift gears and to understand the degree to which that policy is currently ideologically driven, and to be able to discern the tensions between the ideologues (so-called neo-conservatives) and the realists (Baker-Hamilton Report) in determining policy.

Yet to argue as some do that AIPAC et al. is ‘just another lobby’ does not do justice to reality. It is more than that. Questions remains: How is it that AIPAC has been able to become so influential? What are the limits, the illusions of this power? One insight is that, other than on the extreme east and west coasts, the United States, is, to a very great extent a country where people in general are not involved in foreign affairs, concerning the Middle East or elsewhere. Their minds tend to be more focused on the problems of everyday living, sports, shopping, than, with international issues, which, with few exceptions are left to Congress and the president (unless they get out of hand, as with Iraq currently). As a result, some small, well focused lobbying groups have been able to achieve influence beyond their actual political weight (=power) in the American body politic, among “the Jewish Lobby” in support of Israel and the Cuban exiles in their half century *jihād* against Fidel Castro.

While not denying that AIPAC has considerable influence, to claim that AIPAC and like organizations ***control US Middle East policy*** is to amplify their role beyond reality while de-emphasizing the importance of other key players. Among those groups in the first rank, often forgotten abroad especially in Europe, are Christian fundamentalists and neo-conservatives still in power. Behind the stage, as ever, is the influence of those economic interests most directly involved in US Middle East policy: oil companies, military contractors, construction companies and the array of private financial institutions that make up that murky complex web of US-Middle East economic relations.

With the exception of the Christian fundamentalists (organized in a lobbying effort called ‘Christians United for Israel’ the others advance their interests in a more subtle, quieter manner. In the mix between these players, the louder voices are not necessarily the most powerful. To the contrary.

Ironically, for all the corruption and cynicism of contemporary American political life, the United States ***still has healthy institutional structures and channels for people to participate in the system and influence its direction.*** The problem is not so much the institutions themselves which we both (Mañé-Estrada/Prince) believe remain viable, (despite recent attempts to by-pass them) but the low levels of participation in civil society itself. It follows that if more Americans of all political and religious persuasions participated more actively in American civil society and took a more active interest in US Middle East policy – not only those of Jewish or Arab heritages-US Middle East policy would be more balanced and the power of AIPAC would be put in a more realistic perspective.

What about Europe’s role?

The absence of civic participation in Middle East policy is not only a problem of American institutions. In Europe too in recent times there has been certain apathy, a sense of helplessness, that the Americans can do most of the work and Europeans can little influence the process. This is unfortunate for a number of reasons. First, as time goes on it becomes rather clear that the United States by itself cannot solve the regions problems. Its weight in the international arena, while still considerable, is less than it was previously.

More importantly, Europe needs to assert itself both for moral and geopolitical reasons. European knowledge of the Middle East, its people, its languages, its history, is profound. Ultimately the two – Europe and the Middle East – are almost one, as thinkers like Braudel have suggested. Given this wealth of knowledge and experience, combined with the not insignificant reality that Europe has known the consequences of war, Europeans can offer valuable insights and key initiatives to the peace process. It is not accidental that a certain hope for Middle East peace sprang from talks in Oslo. For these and other reasons European input in Middle East peace making is badly needed.

Is it not time for Europe to stop placing all the blame for the failure of Middle East peace making on the United States, to shake off its political lethargy and to actively and positively join in the game? Why can't the Europeans *join Americans and be activists for Middle East peace too?* Otherwise, all of those who think themselves as “innocent bystanders”, through negligence become accessories to this longstanding tragedy.