

# Tablet

## NYT Columnist, Former Ambassador Stage Debate

'The U.S. Should Step Back From Its Special Relationship With Israel'

BY MARC TRACY | 4:31 pm Feb 10, 2010

The Intelligence Squared<sup>[1]</sup> debate series has a cool gimmick: at the beginning, audience members vote on the resolution via little keypads at each seat; at the end, they vote again; whichever side changed the most minds “wins.” As last night’s debate began, it was exciting to find that 25% of the crowd voted “undecided,” meaning that many minds were open to persuasion as the four panelists debated the resolution, “The U.S. should step back from its special relationship with Israel.”

Held at New York University’s student union on the southern border of Washington Square Park, the debate, moderated by ABC News’s John Donovan, pitted *New York Times* columnist Roger Cohen and Columbia Professor Rashid Khalidi, who defended the resolution, against former U.S. Ambassador to the European Union Stuart Eizenstat and former Israeli Ambassador to the United States Itamar Rabinovich, who opposed it. An immediately telling juxtaposition: two ultra-political-establishment figures arguing for the status quo special relationship, two relative outsiders arguing for a paradigm change.

Much of what the sides argued could be easily predicted. Cohen and Khalidi said that the United States’s uniquely strong support for Israel harms U.S. interests: America wants a two-state solution; Israel’s settlement policy makes that less and less likely; therefore, the United States (and U.S. tax dollars) are, effectively, bankrolling policies inimical to its own interests. Eizenstat and Rabinovich, meanwhile, are no right-wingers. But they nonetheless argued that the special relationship does serve the U.S. interest. They did so, first, by minimizing the importance of the Palestinian conflict to the United States (“It’s most important for Israel, not America,” Rabinovich asserted), and, second, by citing Israel’s strategic location, crucial intelligence-sharing, and the rest.

On top of that, they argued, the special relationship represents a moral commitment. That’s what you usually hear: pro-special relationship folks cite morality; anti-special relationship folks cite realpolitik. The most interesting thing from last night, though, was the way these were flipped. Cohen and Khalidi spoke eloquently about Palestinian suffering. And Eizenstat and Rabinovich made a compelling, classically realist case for close ties.

Eizenstat disputed that the special relationship permitted Israel to get away with not making sufficient concessions: in fact, he argued, it is precisely what *enabled* Israel to concede, say, the Sinai, and what will enable it to concede, say, the Golan and the West Bank. “The United States would lose the levers it has used” if it abandoned the special relationship, Eizenstat claimed. “Everyone knows only the U.S. can talk to both sides. It would *lose* that ability.” Eizenstat also offered this (even more hardcore ideologically realist) argument: that the special relationship must continue so as to reassure other allies of America’s “constancy.” “It would send a chill down the spine of every ally,” he said, “because they’d worry they’d be next on the chopping block.” (To which Khalidi retorted: “What would happen with some of our allies? They would applaud!”)

Cohen had the night's worst and best moments. The worst came after an audience member asked why, since polls routinely show most Americans favoring the special relationship, U.S. policy shouldn't reflect that. After treading dangerous ground—"There is a state called Florida," Cohen mused, arguing that electoral politics rather than popular opinion have the most influence—Cohen reported that a "reliable source" informed him that one congressperson had told Obama, "If you want your health bill, step back on Israel." "BOOOOOOO!" went the audience reply. It was a dumb line—that is a *hefty* charge, and the fact that the representative and the source were both unnamed gave it the aura of tossed-out half-truth—but it was also interesting to see that what most activated Israel's fans in the crowd were the sorts of charges about the Israel Lobby's influence that are best summed up with a reference to Stephen Walt and John Mearsheimer's book.

But Cohen also made a devastating rhetorical move (if a more neutral substantive one) in his closing argument, when he told the crowd that to vote in favor of the resolution would constitute a "courageous" act, slowly but surely softening the stifling consensus that is so counterproductive to both America and Israel. For one moment, those little keypads felt like more than a gimmick. It was very powerful.

In the final vote, the yeas had it: 49% for, 47% against, 4% undecided (before the debate, it was 33% for, 42% against). The resolution's structure probably made it more difficult on Eizenstat and Rabinovitch: they were tasked with defending the proposition that the U.S. relationship with Israel ought to be *unlike* its relationship with any other country, whereas all Cohen and Khalidi had to advocate is that it be precisely like the friendly-but-not-too-friendly relations America maintains with a dozen other strong allies. Is that imbalance—the very special argumentation required to defend a very special relationship—the fault of a biased debate resolution? Or is it built into the special relationship itself?

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