



## ***Israel and America, or Israel and the Palestinians?***

By Uriel Heilman · February 10, 2010

What are we talking about when we're talking about America's special relationship with Israel?

To listen to the panelists at Tuesday night's Intelligence Squared debate arguing for the proposition that "The U.S. should step back from its special relationship with Israel," we're talking about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The panelists, New York Times columnist Roger Cohen and Columbia University professor Rashid Khalidi, kept returning to the argument that U.S. support for Israel has made the two-state solution virtually impossible. The United States, they argued, needs to stop bankrolling the Israeli occupation and hold Israel accountable for its actions in the Palestinian-populated territories, including settlement expansion.

On the other side of the aisle, former Israeli ambassador to Washington Itamar Rabinovich and former White House official Stuart Eizenstat argued that the close relationship between Israel and America serves both countries' national interests, as well as the cause of peace. Without the security of a dependable, close ally in America, Israel could never make the concessions it has for peace, such as withdrawing from the Sinai in exchange for peace with Egypt. On the flip side, Israel provides America with real-time intelligence and helps counter nuclear proliferation.

There really wasn't much new in Tuesday night's debate.

Cohen argued that in order to bring Israelis and Palestinians closer together America should punish Israel for its actions in the West Bank. "Israel, if it thinks it can act with complete impunity, is not going to be responsive to U.S. desires," Cohen said. Eizenstat countered that punishing Israel has the opposite effect: When the Obama White House took a tough stance toward Israel on settlements in 2009, it had the consequence of increasing the demands of the Palestinians, who refused to return to the negotiating table. He blamed Israel's adversaries, not Israel, for the absence of a peace deal. "If there were a Martin Luther King leading the Palestinian movement, they would have had peace long ago," Eizenstat said.

Rabinovich, a former Israeli negotiator with Syria, argued that the special relationship between Israel and America increases the motivation for Arab nations to make peace with Israel. "Syria knows the road to the Golan leads through Washington, and not Tehran," Rabinovich said. Khalidi countered that the special relationship has fostered deep unease in the Arab world toward the United States.

At the heart of the disagreement between the two sides are differing paradigms of why the Middle East is such a problem. In Cohen and Khalidi's view, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the heart of the problem, and America perpetuates the conflict by failing to force Israel into taking the steps necessary for peace. Cohen said that terrorists like Khalid Sheikh Mohammed say U.S. policy toward the Palestinians motivated his actions toward the United States, and argued that downgrading the America-Israel relationship could increase U.S. security.

The other side believes the heart of the Arab-Israeli conflict is the Arab world's inability to accept Israel, and that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is used as a feint by Arab governments and others around the world to avoid addressing the real problems of the Middle East: undemocratic governments, terrorism, the U.S. occupation of Iraq, Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons. As Rabinovich pointed out, Osama bin Laden's gripe is with the United States and Saudi Arabia, not Israel.

While the debate was supposed to be about the America-Israel relationship, it kept coming back to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Is it the Palestinians' own fault that they're weak and divided, or Israel and America's fault? Are the Palestinians in the West Bank suffering horribly (they ride donkey carts while the Israelis zip around in sleek cars, Cohen said, somewhat untruthfully) because America bankrolls Israel's defense industry, or is life in the West Bank improving drastically due to U.S. investment and training of Palestinian security and Israel's partial withdrawal from West Bank cities?

It's all about how you frame the conversation.