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THE NEW DRAMA OF IDEAS

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When was the last time you got someone to change their mind about a challenging issue? You know the usual drill. At a dinner party the topic of, say, Israel is broached, and the evening turns toxic. Opposing sides trot out long-held prejudices, opinion posing as fact, or -- the worst! -- statistics. No one even listens to, much less gets convinced by, anyone else.

Stepping up to the plate in an effort to bridge the gulf of non-communication is a series called Intelligence Squared US. The brainchild of insurance executive Robert Rosenkranz, who acquired the rights to the original British version, IQ2US stages public debates on a sharply framed proposition concerning some pressing issue of the day. And yes, folks not only listen -- they may even change their point of view.

Feb 9 a huge pre-blizzard crowd convened at NYU's Skirball Center to hear a debate on the motion, "The US Should Step Back from Its Special Relationship with Israel." Arguing in support were Roger Cohen, columnist for the New York Times; Rashid Khalidi, Professor of Arab Studies at Columbia University; Stuart Eizenstat, former senior level diplomat; and Itamar Rabinovich, former Israeli Ambassador to the United States. The event included a reception, then the debate -- expertly orchestrated by John Donvan of ABC News Nightline; questions from the audience; and, finally, our vote on who won -- or more precisely, which side swayed the most listeners.

A private post debate dinner followed at Bobo, attended by a crowd that included the panelists, friends, donors, titans of law and finance -- generally, people with their fingers on New York's levers of influence. In a delightful variation on the booze-and-schmooze format, the high-energy Rosenkranz, stood and tossed out additional questions on the topic, which were fielded by panelists already quaffing spirits.

Before the packed house in Skirball, Roger Cohen lead off the debate -- carried on NPR stations and Bloomberg television -- by flatly stating that American policy toward Israel has failed and the hostility between Arabs and Israel continues unabated. By refusing to criticize Israel for permitting settlements on the West Bank, the U.S. is bankrolling the very policies that are defeating its own goal of two states.

Cohen added, "America's perceived complicity in Israeli violence carries a heavy price. Jihadi terrorism aimed at the U.S. is not primarily motivated perhaps by the Palestinian issue, but it is a major factor. It is a potent terrorist recruitment tool."

The revved up audience periodically applauded a point that hit the sweet spot. To wit, the statement that it's wrong to call opposition to Israel anti-Semitic, when Israel has lost touch with its fundamental values. On the opposing team, Eizenstat argued that the U.S. should not step back. "We were the first country to recognize Israel 62 years ago" and we should not abandon our only ally in the region -- and the only state there which permits dissent and debate. "If we withdraw it would send a message of inconstancy."

Rashidi, impassioned and succinct, countered with, "The idea of staying the course does not make us look constant, it makes us look dumb." The United States is seen as systematically weakening itself by its

perverse special relationship with Israel, he went on. "The US cannot be a viable broker or mediator when it backs this policy."

Jumping into the fray, Rabinovich asked, What is special about the relationship? Answer: unusual loyalty on both sides; a close military and strategic alliance. He made the point that our ties to Israel benefit our relations with the rest of the middle east. Syria wanted to make peace with Israel because it was "a pathway to Washington. We can use the special relationship with Israel to make peace with the Arab world."

And on it went. Attention never flagged. In the question segment of the evening, though, I'd award the audience only a B+ Despite Donovan's entreaties, there seems to be an irresistible itch to grandstand instead of saying something that ends in a question mark. Is everyone a frustrated pundit? Without undue harshness, Donovan massaged people into the interrogative mood.

As for the results, the motion that The US Should Step Back From Its Special Relationship With Israel carried the evening. Before the debate 33% agreed; after, 49% agreed. Throughout you got the sense that Cohen and Rhashidi had the facts on their side, which never hurts. At all time the discourse was reasoned but exciting. This was theater -- a drama of ideas. And from wherever you stood, the opposing side -- unlike the right wing goombahs trotted out by public TV news -- offered respectable, credible views. In today's fractured culture the evening struck a blow for civility.