

The History of Anti-Palestinian: Bias from Wilson to Bush

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The Image Problem

by Kathleen Christison
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"A few years ago, I had the temerity to write to David McCullough, the biographer of Harry Truman, to tell him I thought he was wrong about an aspect of Truman's character. I had seen McCullough on a C-SPAN rebroadcast of a talk on Truman. Speaking about the recognition of Israel in 1948, McCullough emphasized his belief that the reason Truman had persevered in recognizing the new state of Israel despite the opposition of many in his administration was that his high moral values would not permit any other course. Truman, McCullough said, simply had to "do the right thing" by "rescuing the Jews in the aftermath of the Holocaust and giving them a state in Palestine and his courage in standing up to the naysayers clearly demonstrated his strength of character."

What I wrote to McCullough is that Truman's stubbornness seemed to me to show the strength of his convictions but not the strength of his character--that he did indeed do the right thing by helping Jews after the Holocaust, but he did not do it the right way. The right way would not have involved displacing another entire population--the Palestinians who lived on the land Truman helped give away. Yet there is no evidence that Truman ever showed concern for this part of his moral project on behalf of Israel.

McCullough was nice enough to write back. He said he thought Truman had not "been malicious but had simply lacked understanding, and in a revealing remark, he acknowledged that Truman "just didn't know enough about [the Palestinians] and their situation" -which he said, quite accurately, is "still true of most Americans" The great shame, he wrote, "is that a reasonable discussion of the subject remains so difficult to achieve in any public way."

Which brings me to my point: Reasonable discussion of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and particularly of the Palestinian perspective, has always been so difficult to achieve in any public way, and since the days of Woodrow Wilson immediately after World War I, this has been as true of policymakers as it has of ordinary citizens and the media. There has been much evolution in U.S. policy on the Palestinian issue over the years, but one reality has held true consistently: every president in the last 85 years, since World War I, has tried to one degree or another to ignore the Palestinian issue in the hope that it would somehow go away—that someone else would resolve it, or that it could be swept under some rug, or that the Palestinians would just not air their grievances.

But by ignoring the issue--by studiously not knowing what the Palestinians' real grievances have been all these years--the United States has kept the conflict going, and escalating, for over half a century. By not understanding and taking into account the Palestinian perspective equally with the Israeli perspective and assuming that Palestinians are motivated simply by hatred of

Jews rather than by the fact of their expulsion and flight from Palestine, the United States has actually created the conditions that have led to most, or perhaps all, of the region's wars.

Public thinking and public perceptions, such as the one David McCullough propounded about the morality of Israel's creation, have had a profound effect on the making of U.S. policy on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict since World War I. Perceptions have a far greater impact, in fact, than do actual realities on the ground. Malcolm Kerr, the late scholar of the modern Arab world, wrote in 1980 that the conventional wisdom on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict was based on a fundamental misperception that tended to skew all policymaking. The perception was that Palestinian national claims were "artificially and mischievously inspired" and thus could be ignored. Everyone—ordinary citizens and policymakers alike—had come to assume, Kerr said, that Arabs simply hated Jews and unreasonably refused to accept Israel's existence, and that this was the ultimate cause of the conflict.

Virtually no one any longer remembered that the Palestinians had been dispossessed in 1948 and that this, not unreasoned hatred for Jews, lay at the heart of the conflict. The Palestinians' dispersal had become what Kerr called "an unrecognizable episode." Even policymakers had forgotten it and forgotten that this was where the root of Palestinian grievances lay. Some things have changed by now, almost two decades after Kerr wrote this. Palestinians were hardly known among the general public in 1980, and almost nowhere were they accepted as having any legitimate stake in the peace process or any legitimate territorial claim. That has changed. But the policymaking frame of reference that Kerr spoke of—which attributed legitimacy to Israel but not to the Palestinians, which approached peace negotiations and policymaking in general from an Israeli perspective—this mindset is still very much with us. Not only does the fact of Palestinian dispossession in 1948 remain an unrecognizable episode, but the fact of Israel's occupation of the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem is now a new unrecognizable reality—mentioned rarely by the media, even more rarely by policymakers. And Israel still enjoys overwhelming predominance in U.S. policy considerations, a reality magnified under the Bush administration.

The basic set of assumptions that has governed policymaking on this issue are an enveloping blanket of tightly knit impressions, perceptions, and fixed ideas that's virtually impossible to unravel. It did not all just start in 1948; it is not a matter only of a very strong pro-Israel lobby; it's not only the influence of a very manipulative media. These are all part of it, but the frame of reference through which policymakers have always shaped policy began to develop well before 1948, and it's a much broader phenomenon than just skillful lobbying or media misinformation. The entire process has been cumulative. I want to emphasize that point: no one event, no one trend in public thinking, no one policymaker brought this frame of reference into existence.

So let me trace the cumulative nature of this frame of reference or mindset. American impressions and stereotypes of Arabs began to take shape in the 19th century. This was a period in which travel to Palestine became immensely popular, not only for scholars in many fields but for ordinary citizens wanting to retrace Christ's footsteps in the Holy Land. Travel writing flourished, adventurers toured the speaking circuit to talk about their experiences, missionaries returned to preach to their congregations. The word got around widely—and virtually all of them conveyed extremely negative images of the Arabs they encountered. Then, when Zionism emerged around the turn of the century, it seemed wholly appropriate to an America steeped in biblical teachings that Jews should return to the Holy Land. This notion

was given added impetus by the prevalent view that Arabs and Muslims were somehow alien to that land and were inferior human beings in any case--warlike and barbaric and not fit to associate with civilized Westerners.

This kind of thinking had an inevitable impact on policymakers of the early 20th century--including Woodrow Wilson, the first president who made a policy decision on Palestine, by endorsing the Balfour Declaration, and Franklin Roosevelt, who followed along because supporting Zionism was "already part of the mindset. It's no accident that, after a century of denigration of the Arabs, the only arguments about Palestine that these" presidents found convincing were those from the Zionist side.

By the time of Harry Truman, the mindset had been cast in concrete. The immense sympathy throughout the U.S. for the Jews after the Holocaust, on top of everything that had gone before, made the establishment of Israel a virtual inevitability. After this had been accomplished, literally" everyone--including the State Department people who had initially opposed Israel's creation--fell into line, and the notion that Israel was a political fact became part of the mindset. Not surprisingly, the Palestinians disappeared from the political radar screen in the United States altogether after 1948 and remained off for two decades. This was a period in which Israel's image was vastly enhanced, while the Palestinians, not constituting a state, had sunk in political oblivion, were at a crippling disadvantage. When they were thought of at all in Washington, it was only as refugees--an issue to which each administration from Eisenhower to Kennedy to Johnson paid less and less attention.

Two trends in public thinking in the 1960s tipped the scales against the Palestinians even further. One was the revival of interest in the Holocaust because of the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Israel in 1961. The trial brought out the horrors of the Holocaust again and had a truly electrifying effect on American public opinion. The Holocaust was written about and discussed by intellectuals, including primarily Elie Wiesel, and it was portrayed in popular books and movies, principally Leon Uris's book and movie Exodus, which had an immense influence on an entire generation of Americans. In all of this, not only did Israel gain added sympathy and affection, but in a kind of zero-sum effect, every notch up in the Israeli image produced a notch down in the Arab image. Friends of Israel laid out for the public a kind of continuum of Jewish suffering, and Arabs were assigned the role of" latter-day Hitlers, still trying to exterminate Jews. When the 1967 war broke out--the second of these major events of the '60s--many people saw it as a concerted Arab attempt to continue Hitler's work and genuinely feared that Israel was facing another Holocaust.

All of this had a profound effect on policymakers. Lyndon Johnson already harbored all the stereotypical notions of Arabs, and he felt a special affinity for Israel--to such an extent that one adviser described him as having Jewish corpuscles in his blood. He had many friends, inside and outside government, who were fervent supporters of Israel, who vacationed with him at his Texas ranch and had constant access to him to talk in an informal and emotional way about their concerns for Israel. The Palestinians didn't have a chance. There was no possible way to bring the Arab or Palestinian viewpoint to the attention of policymakers in this environment. Then the Palestinians compounded this in the late '60s and early '70s by launching a campaign of international terrorism. This did serve to bring them to public attention and out of oblivion, but of course it also severely damaged their already abysmal image.

1967 brought a profound change, not just because it so vastly enhanced Israel's image in the U.S., but chiefly because it fundamentally redefined the conflict by further obscuring its real origins and the Palestinians' real grievances. Policymakers who had long since forgotten anyway that the basis of the entire Arab-Israel conflict lay in the Palestinians' displacement in 1948, now focused on whether and how to resolve the territorial issues created by the '67 war. Those who had never wanted to acknowledge what was at the heart of the conflict could now divert all attention to the issue of the occupied territories.

What this cumulative build-up of a frame of reference totally focused on Israel meant is that the more the Palestinians did to bring themselves to world attention, the more strenuously the United States tried to ignore them. In the 1970s, Henry Kissinger was so nonplussed at the notion of having to legitimize the Palestinians by talking to them that he ignored several overtures from Yasir Arafat that might have been productive had they been explored. In the later '70s Jimmy Carter was completely hamstrung—by political pressures and lobby pressures and media criticism—in his attempts to pursue an opening to the Palestinians and bring them into peace negotiations. In the 1980s, Ronald Reagan, who regarded the Palestinian problem as just another of history's running sores, as he put it, that should be left to Israel to handle, created a policy so unquestioningly pro-Israeli and anti-Palestinian that he followed Israel's lead virtually everywhere, underwriting a vast consolidation of Israeli control over the West Bank and overseeing a campaign by his political allies to deny Palestinian nationalism altogether.

Perceptions of the Palestinians and the total Israeli focus of the general American mindset began to change after Reagan. The first Intifada gained the Palestinians a great deal of sympathy in the United States and forced Israel at least to start on the road to peace talks. These factors, combined with the clear evidence the Palestinians gave, through the PLO's acceptance of" the two-state formula in 1988, that they were ready to live in peace alongside Israel, forced U.S. policymakers to begin thinking of the Palestinians for the first time as a national entity with a stake in Palestine and in the peace process. But it's now easy to see in retrospect that these changes wrought a dozen years ago were not nearly enough to Alter the basic mental framework through which the Palestinian issue has always been viewed.

As a result, even though the U.S. does now recognize the Palestinians as legitimate participants in the peace process, it is still second nature always to follow Israel's lead, letting Israel set the starting point, the pace, and the agenda of any move toward peace. This characterized policymaking in the Clinton years and has intensified in the current Bush administration. Clinton's failure, despite an intensive effort, to bring the peace process to a successful conclusion at Camp David in July 2000 and during the six months that followed was directly attributable to this pursuit of Israel's agenda. There's an irony here in the fact that Clinton had established closer ties with Palestinians than any previous president. But, at bottom, he had no deep understanding of what drove Palestinians, of what their grievances were, of what the occupation meant to their daily lives and to their national aspirations. His overriding focus on Israel was part of his upbringing, part of his mindset.

The Clinton team purported to adopt a position of strict neutrality, never taking a position on the issues under negotiation in the belief that the parties should be left to their own devices to work out a mutually acceptable solution. But in a situation in which Israel was the vastly

stronger side, with physical control over all the territory under negotiation, and the Palestinian side had no way other than verbal argument to advance its position, a hands-off approach by the United States as mediator obviously heavily favored Israel. Clinton's false neutrality gave Israel a free hand to negotiate or refuse to negotiate according to its own needs and to take whatever steps it deemed necessary for its own security, no matter how these impeded further negotiations.

Throughout eight years of peacemaking, Clinton and his advisers removed the idea of occupation altogether from the political vocabulary of the conflict. As a result, they lost sight themselves, and most Americans lost sight, of the most basic issue in the conflict today. The Bush administration suffers from the same myopia. Although they do occasionally refer to the occupation, Bush policymakers are no more aware of what the occupation involves for the Palestinians than the Clinton team was.

Bush, it's clear, has set himself up as distinctly different from Clinton--as sort of the un-Clinton - and he is obviously very different in many ways. This is particularly so in the influence the large group of neoconservatives in his administration has on policymaking, particularly in the Defense Department and on the various White House staffs, as well as the influence the Christian fundamentalists exert. But in a very real sense, Bush has taken his cue from Clinton and pursues a policy virtually identical to his predecessor's. Bush inherited a mindset from Clinton that placed the entire burden of blame on the Palestinians for the collapse of the peace process, and as a result Bush policymakers fail to see any legitimacy in The Palestinian position. They show no understanding of the grievances that sparked the Intifada, and no interest at all in the Palestinian perspective on the conflict. Only by ignoring the Palestinians in this way is it possible for Bush to hail Sharon as a man of peace at the very moment that Sharon is destroying the entire infrastructure of Palestinian society.

Today, perhaps more than at any time in the past, the political culture in the United States makes it almost impossible for policymakers to gain a balanced view of the conflict. The events of September 11 and their aftermath militate against any serious reassessment of where the Palestinian-Israeli issue stands; the domestic political risks of confronting Israel are almost overwhelming; sympathy for Israel is high; pressures on policymakers from supporters of Israel inside and outside government and in Congress are intense; and the media, which ultimately create the atmosphere in which ordinary citizens and policymakers alike form their most basic impressions, have shown a higher degree of vicious anti-Palestinian bias than at any time since the 1970s, and maybe ever.

There has never been much room in American political discourse, at any level, for the Palestinian perspective. But after years in which the Palestinians had begun to be accepted by public opinion as legitimate participants in the peace process, the extent and intensity of the Poisonous atmosphere in the wake of the Intifada and of September 11 are startling. The United States has always been blind, and is today even blinder, to the Israeli occupation as the root of the present conflict and therefore refuses to accept the Palestinian perspective on the conflict as having any merit. As always from the beginning, Palestinians and their concerns are essentially invisible to U.S. policymakers.

In the end, what has this singular U.S. focus on the Israeli perspective meant, for the Palestinians and for the Middle East in general? The failure to take the Palestinian perspective

into account, I believe, has perpetuated the entire Arab-Israeli conflict, at every step along the way. In every war in the last half century, including the 1948 war, you can point to a U.S. failure to anticipate, or to understand the issues involved, or to probe openings that might have prevented conflict. And this has generally always been because we looked at the problem with one eye closed. If anything, this inclination is intensifying under President Bush, and this does not bode well for the future.

Kathleen Christison worked for 16 years as a political analyst with the CIA, dealing first with Vietnam and then with the Middle East for her last seven years with the Agency before resigning in 1979. Since leaving the CIA, she has been a free-lance writer, dealing primarily with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Her book, "Perceptions of Palestine: Their Influence on U.S. Middle East Policy," was published by the University of California Press and reissued in paperback with an update in October 2001. A second book, "The Wound of Dispossession: Telling the Palestinian Story" was published in March 2002. Both Kathy and her husband Bill, also a former CIA analyst, are regular contributors to the CounterPunch website.

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