

# The UN, Israel, and the Gulf Crisis

Nov 6, 1990



Brief Analysis

**T**his week the United States assumes the presidency of the UN Security Council. The first priority on its agenda will be a resolution authorizing force if necessary to reverse Saddam Hussein's aggression. But the Security Council's attention is likely to be diverted by a PLO-led effort to launch a debate on the Secretary General's recommendations that UN protection be extended to Palestinians in the occupied territories, including East Jerusalem. This coincides with increasing violence in the territories and Saddam Hussein's weekend statement that "the battle now is over the Palestinian issue."

In this decisive phase of the Gulf crisis, the United States can ill afford to have the attention of the international coalition distracted, but to have it diverted to the Palestinian issue puts the U.S. in a no-win situation. The Administration will constantly have to choose between condemning Israel and vetoing resolutions supported by our anti-Saddam partners. The international coalition will be strained. Tensions with Israel will increase, weakening the President domestically and only encouraging Jerusalem to dig in its heels further. The Security Council's role in promoting the new world order will be undermined at the same time as it steadily intrudes into the American preserve of the Arab-Israeli peace process.

## Zero-Sum Thinking

The Bush Administration created this dilemma for itself by supporting a Security Council resolution that not only condemned Israel but also produced continuing Security Council involvement with the issue. If this decision was made in the belief that it was the only way to hold the international coalition together, it was a mistake. The idea that the United States must distance itself from Israel to maintain the anti-Saddam coalition reverts to the zero-sum thinking of the early Reagan years. But that Administration discovered it could build strategic relations with both Israel and Arab states. Indeed, the United States cooperated strategically with Israel while helping Saudi Arabia overbuild its military facilities for American use in a crisis and signing access arrangements or engaging in military exercises with Egypt, Morocco, Oman and Bahrain.

If anything, the Gulf crisis has made this "strategic consensus" more, not less, viable. With 430,000 Iraqi troops and seven armored divisions deployed in Kuwait and southern Iraq, the Bush Administration hardly needs to worry that Saudi Arabia might object to its relations with Israel. The central reality is that the Saudis are dependent on the United States to defend them. They are in no position to determine the nature of our relations with other allies. And if they raised no objection in earlier years, why would they object now when Saudi Arabia and Israel face a common direct threat from Saddam Hussein's army and his strategic weapons? Indeed, Saudi officials privately emphasize that a new anti-Saddam consensus now exists between Israel, Egypt, Syria and Saudi Arabia.

The best evidence of the non-zero-sum nature of relations with Israel and the Arab states lies, ironically, in the Soviet experience. After years of urging by U.S. policy-makers, the Soviet Union chose the height of the Gulf crisis as the moment to renew diplomatic relations with Israel and announce that direct flights of Soviet Jews to Israel would soon commence. The international coalition's Arab partners avoided even taking note of the development. Saudi Arabia certainly did not rethink its decision to establish diplomatic relations with Moscow after more than four

decades of refusing to do so.

The idea that U.S. policy needs to be more pro-Palestinian to ease our Arab partners' embarrassment in being allied to a pro-Israel United States is also mistaken. It overlooks the central reality of the new, post-invasion Arab politics which pits them against the PLO. Egypt and the Gulf Arabs have responded to the PLO's decision to side with Saddam Hussein by a campaign of press vilification and punitive measures against Palestinians. Aid to the PLO has been suspended, Palestinians have been expelled and arrested, and the peripatetic Arafat is no longer welcome in their capitals. With the PLO in the enemy camp, they are not pressing for pro-PLO actions by their American protector in the Security Council. This point has been borne out by our Arab partners' behavior after the Temple Mount confrontation. They worked with the United States at the UN to thwart a PLO-sponsored resolution condemning Israel, seeing PLO actions as a pro-Saddam effort to divert the Security Council and split the coalition. They also helped defeat a subsequent Iraqi-PLO effort in the Arab League to condemn the U.S. for blocking the PLO proposal.

The Bush Administration therefore has no reason to fear that a failure to condemn Israel in the Security Council will embarrass its Arab allies. They need U.S. help against Saddam Hussein and have no interest in handing him a victory by allowing the Palestinian issue to divide the alliance. If the Bush Administration condemned Israel in the Security Council to please its Arab allies, it was meeting an Arab demand that was not being made.

#### Condemning Israel for Its Own Sake?

Secretary of State Baker denied that fear of damage to the coalition was behind the Administration's action in the Security Council. "The resolution is one the U.S. would have voted for had there been no Iraq issue or crisis," Baker told the press on October 16. If that is true, then the Administration seriously underestimated the problems it would create for itself by taking its condemnation of Israeli actions in Jerusalem to the Security Council. Israel has regarded the UN as a hostile, dangerous place because of its automatic anti-Israel majority. It was unwilling to cooperate when the issue became a question of its sovereignty over Jerusalem. By allowing the Security Council to act, the United States created a dynamic that will be more difficult to reverse the longer it continues. Each new resolution forces the United States to choose between defending Israel or siding with the majority. The more often it votes against Israel, the less cooperative Israel becomes; each condemnatory resolution introduced only hastens the day when a veto will have to be cast.

The Secretary General makes clear in last week's report that "the negative vote of members of the Council" previously prevented UN efforts to assume a larger role on the Palestinian issue. The fact that the United States is no longer standing in the way has clearly created an opportunity to insert the UN into the process. The Secretary General has now pushed through the open door by recommending a conference of the Higher Contracting Parties to discuss ways of implementing the Geneva conventions and by suggesting that the Security Council should extend the mandate of UN personnel in the region to monitor Israel's handling of the Palestinians. If the United States now accedes to these proposals, it will be allowing the Security Council to micro-manage Israel's response to the intifadah. There will be no end to UN involvement with the Palestinian issue. De facto linkage will be established with Security Council action on the Gulf crisis. Moral equivalence will be established between Iraq and Israel on the issue of violating the Geneva conventions. And both problems will be rendered less amenable to solution.

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