

# The eye of the beholder: US-Israeli politics and Iraq

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Two mothers meet on a street corner. One asks the other: "How are the kids?" The second mother responds, with weary exasperation, "Don't ask." And then she answers. "My son's new wife is impossible. She never gets his meals cooked on time; she is always demanding money to buy stuff; and, worst of all, she thinks she has to have a new winter coat just because her old one is not in style. What a loser this woman is!"

"And how's your daughter and her new husband?", asks the first mother.

"You wouldn't believe," the second mother responds. "Her husband never takes her out to eat; he demands that his meals be served right on time every day; and guess what, he is so cheap he won't even buy her a new coat."

Perspective, the eye of the beholder, is everything. It shapes our attitude, our emotions and above all, it shapes our sense of what is right or wrong. A few years ago a news report described an incident involving a Miami, Florida, immigrant from Africa who was arrested and fined for killing chickens in his garage. The story reported that the man "claimed" he needed the blood of the chickens for a religious ceremony. City officials were unsympathetic and the story ended with the assumption that police action had halted inhumane treatment of animals. The perspective of this story was clearly written from the side of the animals, dictated by a mindset derived from the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. The legitimacy of the religious tradition of the family was ignored.

Perspective is everything. In his book, *Why Religion Matters*, Huston Smith writes:

We seldom take time to reflect on the way our unconscious attitudes and assumptions about the nature of things affect the way we perceive what is directly before us. It takes philosophers to call attention to this oversight, as William James did when he said that in interviewing a prospective roomer a landlady would do better to inquire about his philosophy of life than to check his bank account.

Media — print, visual, audio, and cyber — shape how we view the world because the information we receive is couched in terminology and images chosen from a distinct bias. Some refer to such information as "conventional wisdom", a collection of facts that, of course, everyone agrees must be true. That wisdom changes when new information emerges that reshapes our perspective. It took a few years but thanks to the courage and persistence of Galileo, we stopped thinking of the earth as the centre of our solar system and came to accept the sun as our central reality.

Religious leaders resisted this scientific notion with great vigor because Galileo's finding challenged central teachings of the faith. But as the evidence piled up, public attitudes were slowly reformed and a new perspective prevailed. The stronger the emotional attachment is to an old perspective, the harder it is even to acknowledge the possibility of a different way of viewing reality.

## Images of the Middle East

In modern times, the understanding about which players are good or bad in Middle East politics is so deeply ingrained in western public consciousness that even to contemplate a different perspective is to deny reality itself. The power of media to shape our attitudes toward Middle Eastern politics builds upon a public consensus developed over many generations, attitudes so buried in our past that we didn't even know they were there to affect our worldview.

Mark Twain travelled to Jerusalem in the latter part of the 19th century and wrote a report that convinced readers that the sacred city was dirty, crowded and inhabited by people called Arabs who were far inferior to civilised western white visitors. Twain's reputation was sufficient to shape public attitudes toward Arabs by people who rarely paid any attention to the region. Fast forward to the end of the 20th and beginning of the 21st century and you still find movie images of Arabs that are negative, easy fictional targets for defenders against 'terrorism', a convenient term to describe any activity aimed at US or Israeli targets.

The ten year old economic embargo against Iraq, begun during the first Bush administration and continued under President Clinton, with the support of allied nations who fought in Desert Storm, has long since outlived its supposed effectiveness. Yet it remains in place, defended as the only way of removing Saddam Hussein from power. Documentation is overwhelming that the only people suffering from the embargo are the citizens of Iraq. The impact on Iraqi public opinion has been to strengthen support for Hussein, not to diminish it.

And yet, a second Bush administration, again supported, though this time with decreasing enthusiasm, by England and France, still insists that games can be played with oil for food that will lessen the pain of the embargo and eventually lead to the ousting of Iraq's leader. A mother's flawed perspective toward the spouses of her son and daughter makes for strained family gatherings, but when an entire nation is seen through a cracked glass, as is the case with Iraq, the result is the suffering of an entire population with catastrophic results.

Viewers and readers in the west see and hear this suffering and take note that millions have died or are permanently maimed, and yet there are few outraged voices that demand the end of the embargo. How can this be? What possible hold over western consciousness could be so strong that Iraqi suffering from an irrelevant and ineffective embargo continues unabated?

#### US-Israeli politics

Political analysis is supposed to consider complexity, acknowledge ambiguity and stipulate a great variety of reasons why public attitudes have been shaped in a particular direction. But sometimes complexity gives way to clarity, as it did to me as a child living in the southern United States where the adults around me had to be forced by legal action to end the practice of racial segregation. More recently apartheid finally ended in South Africa long after the rest of the world knew that a white minority was clinging to a perspective that blinded it to injustice.

Iraq had not played a large role in western consciousness except as government leaders and public elites in politics, media and business saw the nation as a player in the politics of oil. But the fate and suffering of Iraq are related to a neighbouring country which does play a huge role in western consciousness, the state of Israel, which was born in 1948 in the aftermath of World War II and the horror of the Holocaust. Because Israel is central to American consciousness, whatever affects that country in its neighbourhood is judged in terms of how this benefits or harms Israel.

This attitude derives from American politics, and especially from members of the US Congress. Israel's short history has been one of an evolving entry into American domestic politics; its creation as a state was initially resisted by many anti-Zionists in the Jewish community, religious and secular Jewish leaders who feared that a state devoted exclusively to Jews would reflect badly on Jews elsewhere. The need for a secure homeland for a people who had suffered persecution for centuries was sufficient to overcome that resistance.

Plagued by an anti-semitism rooted in Christian tradition and scripture, the Jewish people made a sufficient case for their own state, and they found a responsive American political leader in President Harry Truman who was faced an uphill re-election campaign in 1948, and who is supposed to have said at the time, 'There are not many Arab voters in this country.'

Identification of American Jews with the state of Israel was an easy sell to a people who lived in a Christian environment in which their minority status made assimilation economically possible, but

emotionally difficult. I have worked in American Democratic party politics for much of my adult life and I know from experience that some of the most supportive members of that party have been those Jewish citizens who identified with other minority groups in the nation and worked consistently for public policies that supported the poor and powerless.

And for many years, the struggling new nation of Israel fit into that same pattern of concern, immigrants from Africa, eastern Europe and the United States who came to Israel to find that place of security and sense of belonging in their own nation. In addition, of course, was the awareness that even in western countries, Jews who never actually visited Israel, knew that there was a place in the world that belongs to them, a sense of identification which is especially strong among a people whose history has been one of persecution.

This perspective in support of Israel has developed into a basic component of American foreign policy, shaped by an attitude now deeply rooted in American public opinion. And nothing solidified that attitude as much as the threat of the dreaded accusation of 'anti-semitism' which was easily levelled at persons who disagreed with the prevailing pro-Israel perspective. In a search of published material as far back as the middle 1980s it was clear that the danger of being called anti-semitic was a powerful weapon in the hands of those who defend the Israeli perspective in American domestic politics.

Florida University Professor Cheryl Rubenberg wrote in the March-April, 1987, Palestine Focus, '...Zionists have no more intimidating weapon with which to discredit their opponents or silence their detractors than the allegation of anti-Semitism.' Theologian Rosemary Ruether wrote in the fall, 1987, Arab American Affairs Journal, '...Zionism has sought, from the late forties, to establish a link between guilt for the Holocaust and support for Israel. ...(This is done) by making symbolic transfers between Nazis and Arabs... Any criticism of Israel is treated as a threat to national security and is referred to as making possible 'another holocaust.''

These references by prominent American scholars appeared in Arab-oriented publications, not in mainline American journals. The linkage of anti-semitism with criticism of Israel kept American politicians in line, but it was not openly stated as a threat; rather, it just sits there as a constant reminder that politicians not friendly to Israel must be guilty of anti-semitism.

Is biased reporting inevitable?

The perspective shaped by these political attitudes saw Israel as inhabited by victims of the Holocaust, a people surrounded by Arab states that refused to accept this new state in their midst. An Arab perspective, which saw Israel not as a victim but as an invader into a land and a region that had for centuries had been known as Palestine, was virtually non-existent in the United States, and could not survive in politics.

In the United States there were no Arab activists to influence American politicians with contributions; no Palestinian citizens to move into influential positions in government, media, and business and from those positions shape public opinion. The perspective toward the Middle East was never that of what is in the best interest of all people involved, but what is good for the United States, and by extension, Israel, the country and the people with whom the vast majority of American citizens identified as an ally who supports, as a Middle East outpost, our foreign policy.

This pro-Israel perspective controls the way in which government and public leaders view the Middle East, how media reports on developments there, and in what way American/Israeli interests are protected. The people of Iraq, part of the Arab community that surrounds Israel, are victims of that perspective. That suffering, whenever it surfaces in western media, and that is seldom, is seen as 'regrettable', but inevitable because their leader, Saddam Hussein, is viewed as a threat to the stability of the region, and especially, to the security of the state of Israel.

The scud missiles Iraq sent toward Tel Aviv during the Gulf War helped seal, from the western media's perspective, and therefore from the public's perspective, Hussein's position as the

'demon' whose continued control over Iraq was a permanent threat to Israel's security. Ironically, in one of the twists of foreign policy reasoning, it was determined by the first Bush White House that a unified Hussein-run Iraq, greatly weakened by the devastation of the Gulf War, was preferable to a divided Iraq, separated into three separate states, north, middle and south. Better the devil we know than the unknown of a future divided Iraq we don't know.

Media reports rarely look at the history or the political reasoning that lie behind current events. A conventional worldview is developed and accepted as reality and all else is derived from that perspective. From the perspective of pro-Israel conventional wisdom, Israel continues to be viewed as the embattled free country in the midst of hostile Arab neighbours. Few reports of daily clashes between combatants in the region take note of the reason why Palestinians are in rebellion against a military occupation that has been in place since 1967.

Few report, as one author recently noted that, 'even years after [the] Oslo [agreement], the Palestinians still lacked basic political freedoms, still lived under Israeli domination in small isolated enclaves, still endured the worst aspects of Israel's occupation practices, and suffered increasingly severe economic deprivation and hardship.'

Brian Whitaker, writing in *The Guardian*, a London-based newspaper, illustrates the degree to which media perspective is shaped by a pro-Israel bias by citing recent reports of the conflicts which describe Palestinians as 'attacking' and Israelis 'responding'. Even when there has been no Palestinian 'attack' on an Israeli outpost, Israel is described as responding to a possible security threat. This shaping of the news is standard military issue, but as Whitaker points out, the media buys it as factual because it has chosen sides in the struggle and renders its reports accordingly.

In the months before American public opinion started to turn against United States policy in Vietnam, news reports followed exactly this same pattern: American military attacks were 'responding' to Vietnam attacks. In that instance, reporting was from the American side, so the military line was assumed to be true. It was not until a few journalists started reporting the background in greater depth that the American public slowly realised that this was not war of liberation, but was, in fact, an American intrusion in a civil war.

It is informative to read articles and books published in the United States in the 19th century with their references to red-skinned 'savages' who fought the brave and courageous white settlers. The phrase, 'the only good Indian is a dead Indian' was part of the lexicon of those settlers. White-oriented media perspective of the period allowed for no alternative view of the situation.

Challenging 'conventional wisdom'

Even though the American press is more biased toward Israel than its English counterparts, because the domestic political pressure is so much stronger, this bias is also evident in England. In his *Guardian* article, Brian Whitaker found the following statistics in his paper's electronic archives. During a 12 month period, 1,699 stories in the *Guardian* referred to the West Bank, but only 49 of these references described the West Bank as 'occupied'; in 513 of the articles, the word 'occupied' or 'occupation' appeared elsewhere in the text. But that leaves 1,107 stories '66% of the total' which fail to refer to the West Bank as occupied. The term 'occupation', which Israel rejects, is most often referred to as an attribution. For example, a recent report from CNN's Jerusalem bureau chief reported that Palestinians were angry at 'what they regard as Israeli occupation.'

Only a perspective which views reality from an Israeli perspective would need to refer to military occupation as an opinion and not a reality. American politicians are especially sensitive to any phrase that doesn't completely support whatever is currently the official Israeli line. And their constituents, many of whom have little interest in the region, accept this official position as 'conventional wisdom', much as the church before Galileo taught and demanded agreement with the obvious fact that the earth was the centre of the universe.

Amy Wilentz, an American journalist who wrote for The New Yorker from Jerusalem, has written a new novel, *Martyrs? Crossing*, which describes the aftermath of the death of Ibrahim Hajimi, a Palestinian child at an Israeli checkpoint. Noting that her work of fiction is being repeated in so many actual events in Palestine, Wilentz wrote recently in the Los Angeles Times, "Ibrahim is a conflation of many Palestinian babies who have been born, suffered or died at checkpoints for no defensible reason. No matter what the situation on the ground, there can have been no reason for the Israelis to have delayed a diabetic in a potentially fatal episode. The Israelis even claim that they do not delay such people, but they do."

There is no reason why death should come so early and tragically to children in either Palestine or Iraq. Leaders who control the lives of these children refuse to acknowledge that they have the power to halt this suffering. Instead they continue to live in a cocoon of comfort given to them by a perspective which blatantly ignores the reality of injustice, hiding behind a view of politics which presumes security can be found only in the agony of others.

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