

HEBREW NATIONALISTS: Why the U.S. Supports Israel

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Recent opinion polls that show that the American public overwhelmingly wants the United States to avoid taking sides in the conflict in the Middle East. Yet members of Congress have been nearly unanimous in their support of Israel in its actions against the Palestinians. Just why is our government so steadfastly supportive of Israel? Does this support further our legitimate strategic interests in the Middle East? Or is it the result of domestic special interest politics?

Guests:

John Podhoretz: Media Fellow, Hoover Institution; Columnist, New York Post; Author, Bush Country: How Dubya Became a Great President While Driving Liberals Insane.

Steven Spiegel: Professor of Political Science, University of California, Los Angeles.

Stephen Zunes: Associate Professor of Politics and Chair of the Peace & Justice Studies Program, University of San Francisco; Author, Tinderbox: U.S. Middle East Policy and the Roots of Terrorism.

Peter Robinson: Today on Uncommon Knowledge, what's the real reason the United States supports Israel?

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Peter Robinson: Welcome to Uncommon Knowledge. I'm Peter Robinson. Our show today, the United States and Israel. Recent polls indicate that the American public overwhelmingly wants the United States to avoid taking sides in the conflict in the Middle East. Yet, in recent votes in Congress, both the House and Senate proved nearly unanimous in supporting Israel in its actions against the Palestinians. Why does the United States support Israel so steadfastly? Are we giving Israel support that Israel truly needs? Does our support for Israel advance or undermine our own interests in the region?

Joining us, three guests. John Podhoretz is a columnist for the New York Post. Steven Spiegel is a Professor of Political Science at the University of California at Los Angeles. And Stephen Zunes is a Professor of Politics at the University of San Francisco and the author of Tinderbox: U.S. Middle East Policy and the Roots of Terrorism.

Hebrew Nationalists

Peter Robinson: Members of the House and Senate are closely divided on energy, taxes, immigration, the environment, judicial nomination, even the Congressional calendar. But this year, a resolution expressing unqualified support for Israel in its actions against the Palestinians passed the Senate by 94 to 2 and the House by 352 to 21. Not close at all. Why does the United States support Israel so overwhelmingly? Stephen?

Stephen Zunes: I think it has a lot to do with the perceived role that Israel plays for American interests in what most people acknowledge is the most vital region of the world.

Peter Robinson: American interests?

Stephen Zunes: Yes.

Peter Robinson: John?

John Podhoretz: I think that there is a deep emotional connection between the Israeli national experience and the American national experience. That these are two countries that were born basically on the basis of an idea, and that have a common experience of nation building.

Peter Robinson: Interests on the one hand. Ideals and nation building on the other. Steve?

Steven Spiegel: Well, they're both true, but I would say it's the Bible. American Christians were talking about a Jewish return to Palestine before American Jews. There is a mystical bond between the United States and Israel, just as there is between the United States and Britain and there are some areas of consensus, foreign policy, and this is definitely one of them.

Peter Robinson: O.K. A little bit of history. I think a lot of Americans, certainly this one, tend to assume that Israel and the United States have been like this from the very beginning of Israel's existence. Harry Truman recognizes Israel in 1948 right away. It turns out, as I reminded myself by doing my reading that that wasn't quite the case. Right up until 1967, Israel's closest ally and the source of its primary military support was not the United States but France. And in the '67 war, things changed. By 1973, the '73 war, Richard Nixon is resupplying Israel, warning the Soviets not to intervene in that war. Give me a brief summary of why it is that France was Israel's first close ally and then was supplanted by the United States? Stephen?

Stephen Zunes: The United States recognized at that point that Israel could be a strategic asset. Unlike '56 when we challenged the British and French and Israelis, they are seen perhaps as...

Peter Robinson: So in 1967 when the Israelis defeat the Arabs so roundly, we wake up to the notion that they can be useful to us.

Stephen Zunes: Very much so.

Peter Robinson: Steve?

Steven Spiegel: Yeah, I don't agree with some of this. First of all, it wasn't that the French were supplanted. The French took themselves out because de Gaul decided he wanted to go with the Arabs. He couldn't have done that earlier because of the Algerian war. That had been happening before '67. That was the culmination, and we were very reluctant to get involved...

Peter Robinson: Why did de Gaul make that decision?

Steven Spiegel: Because it was the classic French analysis, you know, over 100 million Arabs versus five million Jews, let's go with the Arabs, oil, et cetera.

Peter Robinson: So there was explicit decision calculated on national interest that the French thought...

John Podhoretz: In the middle of the Six Day War--the Six Day War was 132 hours. Around hour 60, de Gaul said I've had it. I'm done. No more planes for Israel, our military aid is over. It's too dangerous for me, a European nation to confront the, the...

Peter Robinson: The whole Arab world.

John Podhoretz: ...the insurgent Arab world. Which, I mean, if you remember before, it was really only in 1967 that the notion of the use of oil as a political weapon came into being. And Europe, unlike the United States which had its own oil, Europe was looking down at the Middle East and saying, if they want to, if they want to choke us off...

Peter Robinson: Right.

John Podhoretz: If they really do, we have no recourse.

Peter Robinson: So de Gaul says enough of Israel, we need our oil. Why did we get in though, Steve?

Steven Spiegel: Right. But you know, the period of the Seventies, the oil crisis, we were very reluctant. It's true that we began to see Israel as a strategic asset, very slowly: Johnson, more in Nixon, Carter had real qualms. But what really changed everything, I think, is the fall of the Shah. Because that's something that people don't pay enough attention to. I know that Ronald Reagan really believed this as an integral factor, because the...

Peter Robinson: The fall of the Shah is 1979.

Steven Spiegel: That's right. But you know, '78-79, Reagan's running for President and as he looks at the situation, he says wait a minute. We've been relying on the Shah as our linchpin in the Middle East, now who are we going to rely on. And he thought he could pull off Israel and the Saudis, which turned out to be a much tougher task, as all Presidents before and since have discovered, but he really thought of Israel as a strategic asset and every President since Bush Sr. has thought in those terms.

Peter Robinson: O.K., let me ask you now... A more or less standard argument is that Richard Nixon intervenes in the 1973 war on behalf, doesn't intervene with American forces, but he resupplies Israel after the first week of the war goes badly because by that point the Soviets have already lined up behind the Egyptians. And what draws us into support for Israel is the Cold War. Anybody buy that?

John Podhoretz: Well, I think there's a lot of truth to that. That after 1967, Egypt, its military decimated, decimated in a way that's very striking. The Soviet Union embarrassed. Egypt was an ally and sort of a client state. The Soviet Union resupplies Egypt, a resupplying effort that makes it possible for Egypt to attack Israel in 1973. Had the Soviets not done this, there would have been no 1973 Yom Kippur War, because Egypt would not have had the wherewithal. That having happened we were facing, the United States was facing a very, very serious strategic choice. The war was going badly for Israel. The Soviets were going to have a victory, you know, in Asia Minor. Was that something that we could tolerate?

Peter Robinson: From history to domestic politics...

Torah, Torah, Torah

Peter Robinson: AIPAC, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee. Budget of almost 20 million, staff of 130, 60,000 members, ranked by Fortune magazine as one of the most powerful lobbying groups in Washington, ahead, incidentally, of the AFL-CIO. And of course, we know that through AIPAC and indeed on their own, American Jews contribute heavily to political campaigns. So there is this notion that Jewish Americans, population of six million have succeeded so wonderfully in the United States, education, income levels and so forth, that they are disproportionately influential and that has a lot to do with our policy for Israel. Anybody want to...

Steven Spiegel: Yeah, that's wrong.

Peter Robinson: You want to just bat it away?

Steven Spiegel: I do want to bat it away.

Peter Robinson: O.K. Go right ahead.

Steven Spiegel: Because AIPAC is effective because it's got a winning hand. You're very effective if you're working for a candidate who's way ahead and Israel is way ahead in this race for the hearts and minds of the American people.

Peter Robinson: You buy that?

Stephen Zunes: I buy the general argument, but the specifics is I think that Israel has the hearts and minds, support of the American people, has its right to exist in peace and security, but not to support Ariel Sharon violating basic principles of international human rights and international law.

So I think the moral commitment to Israel is really solid but not the policies which were endorsed in this Congressional resolution...

John Podhoretz: During the worst period of the second Intifada, when the suicide bombings were happening almost daily in Israel, polls were taken of U.S. public opinion that suggested numbers akin to 2 to 3% support, positive support for Yasser Arafat. 2% positive opinion of Yasser Arafat. Something like 10% positive support for the Palestinian people. Now numbers like that trump Jewish political power, Christian political power.

Peter Robinson: Right.

John Podhoretz: There was a gut response in the United States in the last two years to the rise of suicide bombing in Israel that changed the nature of the American view of this conflict. Because over the course of the 1990's, it was not the case that Israel was viewed as the same kind of strategic asset. How could it be, particularly because we could base American troops in Saudi Arabia and go to war on behalf of Muslims in Kuwait against Iraq. Israel itself, Yitzchak Shamir, the Prime Minister of Israel in 1991, the last thing that he wanted to do was go to an international peace conference in Madrid and start a process toward the creation of a Palestinian state. He had no choice because Israel had nothing. Israel had no way of saying no to the United States and had no realistic claim on U.S. support, at that moment with a President that was not all that sympathetic, Bush the elder...

Peter Robinson: Bush the elder.

John Podhoretz: And in a world in which the Soviet Union was--in which it represented no bulwark against potential Soviet expansion.

Peter Robinson: Back to questions of national interest. Is our war on terrorism the same as Israel's?

Hard Targets

Peter Robinson: William Kristol... I'm going to give you two quotations, O.K.? Bill Kristol: "No one should doubt that the United States and Israel share a common enemy. We are both targets of an axis of evil." Bill Bennett: "America's fate and Israel's fate are one in the same." Isn't that going a little too far?

Steven Spiegel: We do share the same fate, in that suicide bombing, being tested in Israel is a danger to us. It's clear on the war on terrorism, that the United States and Israel are extremely close and have similar interests. But that does not mean that we don't also have an interest in moving the parties towards some sort of resolution of this terrible conflict if we can, if we get the leadership in the Arab world. And in that sense I would argue that some of the movements in the Arab world are very dangerous for us--fundamentalism--some are very interesting for us--the Saudi peace plan, some of the Egyptian movements, the Jordanian movements and the like of the top leadership.

Peter Robinson: Let me give you another quotation: "There is a critical difference between the Taliban and the Palestinian insurgence," this is Bill Buckley, "which is that the Taliban has no case, zero case. The Palestinians do have a case, never mind how they assert it." That is to say Hamas and Hezbollah have a specific grievance against Israel which has no more to do with us than the grievance of the IRA against the British or of the ETA in Spain against the Spanish government. And that the assertion by Bill Kristol and Bill Bennett that Israel's war is our war is just the kind of overreach that Stephen Zunes was talking about.

John Podhoretz: I do not accept that, for this reason.

Peter Robinson: O.K.

John Podhoretz: The tone and logic of Arab anti-Israeli political, social and moral action is consistent whether you're talking about Islamic figures or secular Arab figures. And the point about that talk is that it starts with Israel and it ends inevitably with the United States. That is, just as Israel has brought in an idea into the Middle East that Arabs do not like, a Jewish nationalist notion and a Western democratic notion, similarly the United States represents what a lot of these figures consider a civilizational challenge to their idea about how the world should operate both either in a secular Arab, Pan-Arab sense or in an Islamic religious sense. Israel represents a challenge to their legitimacy. The United States represents a challenge to their legitimacy. In that sense it is exactly the same.

Peter Robinson: The mental experiment would be if somehow or other, I don't quite know how you'd do it, but if some how or other you could satisfy Hamas and Hezbollah on their historical grievance, right of return or somehow or other you give them the land that they want, would the United States still face a terrorist threat?

Stephen Zunes: I think very much so because if you look at...

Peter Robinson: O.K.

Stephen Zunes: ...Osama bin Laden's, you know, manifestos, he's mainly focused on the Gulf, the U.S. military presence there, the propping of a Saudi regime, but just like any opportunistic Arab leader for just decades he also throws in the Palestinian question because he knows there's a lot of popular support in the Arab world...

Peter Robinson: O.K. So all three of you, I'll let you sum this, but all three of you accept the notion that Israel's war is to some extent is our war, we are not making a strategic mistake by supporting Israel...

Stephen Zunes: I do. I do. Because in fact I, well, again, I personally believe that the U.S. has a moral commitment to Israel's legitimate...

Peter Robinson: Right.

Stephen Zunes: ...strategic concerns. This blank check to maintain this occupation is stimulating a dangerous anti-American reaction, and anti-Israeli reaction...

Steven Spiegel: I don't think we have a blank check, we're trying to get rid of the occupation. The Israelis...

Stephen Zunes: We're arming them, we're vetoing U.N. Security Council resolutions, we're giving them money that makes occupation and construction of settlements possible...

John Podhoretz: For the first time, really since the, since the 1960's we're accepting, we're accepting U.N. Security Council resolution, we're allowing them to pass without United States veto...

Steven Spiegel: We've accepted a Palestinian state in the U.N. Security Council...

Peter Robinson: Next topic: does Israel even need our economic support?

Iron Like a Lion in Zion

Peter Robinson: This is Steve Zunes, I'll let you comment on it, alright, quote, I'm quoting you...

Stephen Zunes: Yes.

Peter Robinson: "In the hypothetical event that all U.S. aid to Israel were immediately cut off, it would be many years before Israel would be under significantly greater military threat than it is today. Israel has both a major domestic arms industry and an existing military force far more capable and powerful than any conceivable combination of opposing forces. The continued high levels of U.S. aid to Israel comes not out of concern for Israel's survival but as a result of the U.S. desire for Israel to continue its political dominance of the Palestinians and its military dominance of the region."

Steven Spiegel: Well, Stephen, I hate to say this but I completely disagree with you. The thing is that...

Peter Robinson: On the first point, could Israel go it alone for some...

Steven Spiegel: No. No.

Peter Robinson: Are they so powerful they don't need us?

Steven Spiegel: No. I think that's incorrect.

Peter Robinson: Right.

Steven Spiegel: And particularly, people have missed how badly Israel is hurting over this Intifada economically. I mean, they've got over 10% unemployment. They've got some very difficult tasks that they have to confront. This war against the Palestinian terrorists is costing them, it costs them dearly. Secondly, what we're trying to do is not shore up the occupation. What we're trying to do is get a peace process or, even now, some kind of peace negotiations going that will assuage the situation and make Israel less dependent and the Palestinians be able to get their act together. So that's a positive role for the United States. I think what this discussion has missed is the positive role that the United States plays as the one respected party to the Arabs and to the Israelis. We've got to be engaged and I think that is our central role, it's, and I think if you look historically that's been our central role from 1949.

John Podhoretz: I think it is preposterous to claim since 1993 when the Oslo Accords were signed on the White House lawn until the incursions in the spring to do something about the suicide bombings...

Peter Robinson: 1993 to 2002. Spring 2002.

John Podhoretz: Right. The story of Israel and the Palestinians has been a rather startling accession, not only to the idea of a Palestinian state, which was anathema in Israel before 1993, political suicide...

Steven Spiegel: And to many Americans.

John Podhoretz: And to many Americans. But you're talking about civil authority control over 98% of the Palestinian people is now in the hands of the Palestinian Authority. Now the Palestinian Authority is a disastrous organization led by a terrorist who has no interest in real nation-building. If he had interest in nation-building there could have been a Palestinian state 25 years ago. Just as, you know, Israel gave back the Sinai to Egypt simply because Anwar Sadat practically flew to Israel and said I want peace. And they gave him back a huge amount of land and \$3 billion a year in oil sales simply to have a piece of paper with Egypt. There could be a Palestinian state. There could be one

tomorrow if the Palestinians themselves, a state that's fully declared and independent and all that. But the fact is that the Israelis have surrendered civil authority over Palestinian populations in a way that I don't think anybody would have thought was possible with this kind of speed.

Peter Robinson: Did the United States push them too hard, too fast?

John Podhoretz: Well, I think they pushed themselves, I believe that they pushed themselves too hard, too fast and the United States wasn't exactly standing in the...

Stephen Zunes: In fact just the opposite, the Israelis supported the idea of Palestinian statehood before the United States did. The Israelis met with Yasser Arafat before the United States did. In fact, I document in the past decade at least six or eight times where the United States has actually taken a harder line towards Israel's Arab adversaries than Israel itself has. I think rather than trying to bring the peace process forward, I mean, we do not, if we wanted a viable Palestinian state, we would insist that Israel withdraw from its illegal settlements...

John Podhoretz: The United States has its own issues with Yasser Arafat. Yasser Arafat is somebody who is directly and personally responsible for the murder of American diplomats, for the murder of American citizens. We have our own grievances apart from the political interests that we have in the creation of a peaceful resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian struggle with Yasser Arafat.

Peter Robinson: Stephen Zunes has been very critical of American policy toward Israel. So what does he believe we should be doing instead?

The Broken Promised Land

Peter Robinson: Israel has gotten used to the idea of ceding civil authority over almost all the Palestinian population to the Palestinian authority. And in turn, as of spring 2002, Yasser Arafat himself was at least talking about holding elections. Isn't everything moving in the right direction and hasn't the United States done a very good job?

Stephen Zunes: No, because we refuse to insist Israel withdraw its illegal settlements that are in violations of the Geneva convention, U.N. Security Council resolutions 446 and 465, which divide this Palestinian entity into this patchwork of non-contiguous...

Peter Robinson: O.K. You, Stephen Zunes, now replace Condi Rice. Give us two pieces of advice you'd give President Bush on how to change our policy toward Israel. Insist that they get out of the settlements?

Stephen Zunes: Yes. That'd be one.

Peter Robinson: And you have another one?

Stephen Zunes: Yeah, basically reiterate our unconditional support for Israel's right to live in peace and security but insist they live up to basic standards of international law and U.N. Security Council resolutions, and withdraw from the settlements...

John Podhoretz: Define settlement. Is the neighborhood Giloh a settlement?

Stephen Zunes: That's not a neighborhood. That's on land seized by military force in 1967 in violation of Article 41 of the Geneva Conventions...

Steven Spiegel: But then you're going for the Palestinians. The Palestinians agreed at Camp David to make a swap of land...

Stephen Zunes: Yeah, again, then there was nothing they could do but swap. The Israelis were offering them a smaller piece. But the point is that the United States is not helping Israel by maintaining an occupation, which many Israelis are pointing out is actually threatening Israel far more than actual withdrawal. That's why I say tough love and to make clear that...

John Podhoretz: If tough love is that Israel reverts to a military situation comparable, indeed, identical to the military situation it faced in 1967 except that on its Eastern border it has an irredentist revolutionary movement, whereas before 1967 it had the nation of Jordan which was a cautious, worried, fretful country with a fretful and worried, cautious king. If that is the solution, that is not a solution. We could impose that theoretically but what would happen is perpetual war between Israel and the Palestinians...

Stephen Zunes: The big difference in '67 was you had Arab armies amassing on the border threatening to destroy Israel. Now Egypt's signed a peace treaty. Jordan's signed a peace treaty. Other Arab states have agreed...

Peter Robinson: The point is it's not armies that are the problem now. It's these acts of terrorism...

Steven Spiegel: And that's more difficult to deal with. Obviously Israel's had a harder time with it.

Peter Robinson: So Israel may have a powerful military but it's not secure...

Steven Spiegel: And the terrorism, I think the...

Peter Robinson: Let's let Steve, Steve, go ahead.

Steven Spiegel: I think the Clinton plan... You know, we're forgetting about the Clinton plan, late 2000, early 2001, which set out a situation in which there would be a Palestinian state, almost all the settlements would be gone, a limited amount of swapping of land so everybody's happy. And that's what our policy ought to be aimed at. It's not a

question of pressuring Israel. That's the wrong question to ask. Israel's security cannot be assured as long as you have this kind of a situation. So we can help Israel more by pushing in the direction of the general outlines of that kind of approach. That's what we ought to be doing.

Peter Robinson: Let me ask our guests for one final piece of advice for President Bush.

A Question of Authority

Peter Robinson: What's the one critical change he ought to make in our policy toward Israel? More pressure on Arafat and force the Israelis to withdraw from the settlements? More support for Sharon? What, what one reform would you have him make in our policy toward Israel? John?

John Podhoretz: The only reform that can bring about a lasting and viable peace is a complete overhaul and overturning of the structure, nature and leadership of the Palestinian authority. Israel cannot deal with a terrorist structure masquerading as a government. And until that changes there can be no peace.

Peter Robinson: Steve?

Steven Spiegel: Palestinian reform. Yes, whoever the leaders, whoever the people are, massive reform. Number two...

Peter Robinson: We can't accept, we can't really make progress until Arafat is gone.

Steven Spiegel: No, I didn't say that.

Peter Robinson: No?

Steven Spiegel: I said Palestinian reform. If Arafat becomes Queen Elizabeth, maybe we can work with that. Secondly...

Peter Robinson: In other words, a detached figure, a figurehead?

Steven Spiegel: Much more detached figure. Secondly, we've got to be active, Mr. President. That's what I would tell President Bush. We've got to get involved. Use the interest of the Arab states. The new interest in doing something. We've got to be engaged. We need a Middle East envoy, whether it's General Zinni or it's someone else in there all the time...

Peter Robinson: All the time.

Steven Spiegel: Not only...

Peter Robinson: Even after a visit by the Secretary of State, even after a couple of visits by Zinni, Bush still isn't doing enough.

Steven Spiegel: Well, the Secretary of State can't be there everyday. You need somebody there all the time.

Peter Robinson: Alright.

Steven Spiegel: And we've got to be making bridging proposals, not pressure, but proposals. We've got to be, when you talk to Israelis or Palestinians or Arabs generally, one thing they want is more American involvement and I would say, Mr. President, that's what we got to do.

Peter Robinson: Give it to them. Give it to them. Steve, you get the last word here.

Stephen Zunes: I think the United States must recognize that Israeli security and Palestinian rights are not mutually exclusive but in fact mutually dependent on the other. Just as occupation and repression cannot justify terrorism, terrorism cannot justify occupation and repression. And we need to recognize that the Israelis will only find real security when Palestinians have a viable state...

Peter Robinson: So you would say to the President, lean a little more heavily on the Israelis?

Stephen Zunes: Yes, and again, unconditional support for Israel's legitimate security interest, but in the context that I think Israel would be far more secure with clearly defined, internationally recognized borders than this patchwork of illegal settlements and military outposts amidst a hostile population.

John Podhoretz: Can I add one final...

Peter Robinson: Go ahead, add one final... this is it.

John Podhoretz: The best thing, the way that peace will be most assured in the Middle East is an American regime change in Iraq and the defeat of Al Qaeda. American force, changing the, the nature of the structure of Arab political debate on the ground will force Arab countries...

Peter Robinson: Very briefly, is there something in that?

Stephen Zunes: Ah, it will just make things worse, inflame things even more. The issue is the occupation, as awful as the Palestinian Arab leadership is, it's like East Timor, it's like Western Sahara.

Peter Robinson: Is there anything in what John says?

Steven Spiegel: We can't deal with the Iraq question until we move forward on the Palestinian issue.

Peter Robinson: Really?

Steven Spiegel: Yes.

Peter Robinson: He says the other way around. Gentlemen, we're out of time. I'm extremely sorry. Stephen Zunes, Steven Spiegel and John Podhoretz, thank you very much. I'm Peter Robinson for Uncommon Knowledge. Thanks for joining us.

Why the US Supports Israel Questions

1. Why did Nixon start America on the road to becoming a strong supporter of Israel?
2. What actions does the US take (or not take) in assisting Israel, which arouses the anger of some of the Arab populations?
3. What items are mentioned, that demonstrate the willingness of Israel to live at peace with its neighbors?
4. What items are mentioned as being evidence of Israel's oppression of the Palestinians?