

**Debate before Yale Political Union  
Yale University, September 9, 2008  
John Mearsheimer's Comments**

**“Resolved: End America’s Special Relationship with Israel”**

**I would like to thank the Yale Political Union, especially Laura Marcus, for inviting me to kick off the 2008-2009 debating season. And I would like to thank all of you for coming out tonight.**

**The US has a “special relationship” with Israel that has no parallel in American history. Indeed, as the late Yitzhak Rabin once said, US support for Israel is “beyond compare in modern history.” Many Americans, especially those who feel a deep attachment to Israel, believe that this unique relationship works to the advantage of both countries, and should be strengthened even more over time.**

**They are wrong, however. The special relationship is good for neither the US nor Israel, and it should be cast aside. Instead, the two countries should have a normal relationship. The U.S. should treat the Jewish state the way it treats other democracies, like Britain, France, Germany, and India. In practice, this means that when Israel is acting in ways that are consistent with American interests, Washington should back it. But when Israel is acting in ways that harm US interests, Washington should distance itself from Israel and use its considerable leverage to get it to change its behavior.**

**Both Israel and the US would be much better off if that were to happen, which is why I hope you will support the resolution before the house.**

**Let me begin with a brief description of the special relationship, and then explain why it does not make good strategic sense for either country.**

**What makes the relationship between America and Israel special is the sheer amount of support that we give Israel and the fact that we give it unconditionally. The Jewish state is the largest recipient of US economic and military aid – about \$500 per year per Israeli – even though it is a prosperous country with a per capita income that the World Bank ranks 27<sup>th</sup> in the world. Since the end of World War II, Israel has received more foreign aid from Washington than any other country.**

**Israel also gets consistent diplomatic backing from the US and we almost always take Israel's side in regional disputes. For example, since 1972, the US has vetoed 42 UN Security Council resolutions that were critical of Israel, which is greater than the combined total of all the vetoes cast by the other Security Council members for the same period.**

**Most importantly, however, that aid is given unconditionally. In other words, Israel gets this aid even when it does things that the US opposes, like building settlements in the Occupied Territories. Furthermore, Israel is rarely ever criticized by US officials, and certainly not by anyone who aspires to high office. Just look at the current Presidential campaign, where both candidates are competing to show how devoted they are to the Jewish state.**

**There are two reasons why this special relationship is a misguided policy.**

**First, Israel's interests, like any other country's interests, are not always the same as America's. Thus it makes little sense for the US to back Israel no matter what it does, because sometimes there will be circumstances where the interests of the two countries clash. For example, it made good strategic sense for Israel to acquire nuclear weapons in the 1960s, given that it lived in a dangerous neighborhood and a nuclear arsenal is the ultimate deterrent. But it was not in America's interest for Israel to acquire nuclear weapons, which is why the US went to some lengths to stymie Israel's nuclear program. Of course, that was before the special relationship was fully established.**

**Second, Israel is a normal country, and as such, it sometimes pursues smart policies and sometimes pursues ill-advised ones. Most of us here tonight are Americans who love our country. But at the same time, we understand that it sometimes adopts foolish policies. Just look at what has happened in Iraq over the past five years. Israel is no different than the US. Indeed, no country has ever pursued a flawless foreign policy. And none ever will. Given that basic fact of life, would it not make sense for US leaders to be able to publicly criticize and pressure Israel when it pursues misguided policies, and support Israel when it pursues smart ones? But that is not how the special relationship works. It requires American leaders to support Israel even when it adopts a wrongheaded policy. It is hard to see how this situation makes good sense for the US, much less Israel.**

**Let me expand on how these problems with the special relationship hurt both countries by discussing concrete cases. I will start with the US, and argue that our support for Israel's policies in the Occupied Territories is one of the principal causes of our terrorism problem and one of the main reasons it is not likely to go away anytime soon.**

**It has been the official policy of every American president since 1967 to oppose the building of settlements in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. And that includes President George W. Bush, who has made repeated requests to the Israelis to halt settlement building. Yet – because of the special relationship – no president has been able to put meaningful pressure on Israel to stop building settlements, and, in effect, colonizing those territories.**

**Just to show you how serious this problem is, consider what the Israelis did in the Occupied Territories between the signing of the Oslo Accords in September 1993 and the outbreak of the Second Intifada in September 2000. During that seven-year period, when the Clinton administration was committed to creating a Palestinian state and finally settling the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Israel confiscated 40,000**

acres of Palestinian land, built 250 miles of connector and by-pass roads, doubled the number of settlers, and built 30 new settlements.

President Clinton, like his predecessors and his successor, did not use America's considerable leverage to halt this building spree. In fact, the Clinton administration effectively supported Israel's actions by protecting it from criticism at the UN, giving it more foreign aid than any other country, and giving that aid unconditionally. Of course, this is what the special relationship demands.

Nevertheless, Israel's policies in the Occupied Territories are not in America's national interest, which is why every president since Lyndon Johnson has opposed the settlements. To be more specific, there is an abundance of survey data and anecdotal evidence which shows that US support for Israel's brutal treatment of the Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank, and US support for Israel's efforts to colonize those territories, angers – if not enrages – a substantial number of people in the Arab and Islamic world.

Not surprisingly, that anger helps fuel terrorism against the US. Let me emphasize that I am not saying that America's support for Israel's policy towards the Palestinians is the only cause of our terrorism problem. I am simply saying it is a major cause. Specifically, it motivates some individuals to attack the US; it serves as a powerful recruitment tool for terrorist organizations; and it generates sympathy and support for terrorists among huge numbers of people in the Arab world.

A critically important issue when talking about America's terrorism problem is the matter of how US support for Israel's harsh treatment of the Palestinians relates to what happened on September 11.

It is commonplace to hear Israel's supporters say that: one, OBL did not care much about Palestinians until recently, and he only cares because it is an effective recruiting device; two, the events on 9/11 had nothing to do with Israel; and three,

those involved in the attacks hated us because of who we are, not our Middle East policies. For example, Robert Satloff from the WINEP, claims that bin Laden's identification with the Palestinians is "a recent –and almost surely opportunistic – phenomenon," while former Middle East negotiator Dennis Ross maintains that bin Laden was merely "trying to gain legitimacy by implying that this attack on America was about the plight of the Palestinians."

These claims, however, are simply not true.

It is clear from the historical record that bin Laden has been deeply concerned about the Palestinians' dire situation since he was a young man. That concern was reflected in his public statement throughout the 1990s, well before 9/11. Consider what Max Rodenbeck, the Middle East correspondent for the *Economist*, wrote in a review of two books about bin Laden, one of which was a compilation of his speeches: "Of all [the] themes, the notion of payback for injustices suffered by the Palestinians is perhaps the most powerfully recurrent in bin Laden's speeches."

Regarding the actual attack on September 11, we know from the work of the 9/11 Commission that US support for Israel was a major reason we were hit that fateful day. It was not the only cause for sure, but it was a key cause.

For example, the 9/11 Commission reports that bin Laden wanted to make sure that the attackers struck Congress, because he saw it as the most important source of support for Israel in the US. The Commission also tells us that bin Laden twice wanted to move up the date of the attacks because of events involving Israel – even though doing so would have increased the risk of failure.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, consider what the 9/11 Commission says about the motives of Khalid Sheik Muhammed, who it describes as the "principle architect of the attacks" To quote the Commission report: "By his own account,

**KSM's animus toward the United States stemmed not from his experiences there as a student, but rather from his violent disagreement with U.S. foreign policy favoring Israel."**

**It is hard to imagine more compelling evidence of the role that US support for Israel played in inspiring the 9/11 attacks. In short, the special relationship between Jerusalem and Washington is helping to fuel America's terrorism problem.**

**Let me now turn to Israel. I will argue that the special relationship has helped it to pursue misguided policies that have been detrimental to its well-being, and maybe even its survival. I will consider two cases: American support for Israel during the Lebanon war in the summer of 2006, and US support for Israel's policies in the Occupied Territories.**

**On July 12, 2006, Hezbollah, the Shia organization that controls southern Lebanon, made a cross-border raid into northern Israel that killed and captured several Israeli soldiers. In response, the IDF launched a major air war against Lebanon. Israel's main goal was to deal a massive blow to Hezbollah's effectiveness as a fighting force. In particular, the Israelis were determined to eliminate the thousands of missiles and rockets that could strike northern Israel. Prime Minister Ehud Olmert drove this point home when he said, "The threat will not be what it was. Never will they be able to threaten this people they fired missiles at."**

**Israel had two different but complementary ways to try to neutralize Hezbollah's missiles and rockets. Israeli leaders were confident that they could use airpower to strike directly at those weapons and take almost all of them out. They also had a more indirect approach for dealing with the problem. Specifically, they planned a classic punishment campaign, whereby the IDF would inflict massive pain on Lebanon's civilian population by destroying residences and infrastructure, forcing hundreds of thousands of people to flee their homes, and killing a significant number of civilians in the process. The aim of the punishment campaign was to send**

a message to Lebanon's leadership that it was ultimately responsible for Hezbollah's actions, and therefore, the country as a whole would pay a great price anytime Hezbollah attacked Israel. In essence, Israel was telling the Lebanese leadership that it must bring Hezbollah to heel.

Both elements of this strategy were destined to fail from the start, as many American strategists understood at the time. Trying to disarm Hezbollah from the air was simply not feasible. Even with an ample supply of smart bombs, there was no way the Israeli air force was going to eliminate Hezbollah's 10-16,000 rockets and missiles. Most of those weapons were widely dispersed and located in caves, homes, mosques, and other hiding places. Moreover, even if the IDF managed to destroy a large portion of Hezbollah's inventory, Iran and Syria would have sent in replacements. Not surprisingly, it quickly became apparent that airpower was not having the advertised effect, as missiles and rockets continued to reach northern Israel on a daily basis. In fact, Hezbollah launched more missiles at Israel on August 13—one day before the ceasefire took effect—than on any other day of the war.

The second element of Israel's strategy – its attempt to punish Lebanon for allowing Hezbollah to operate freely – was also certain to backfire. A wealth of historical evidence and scholarly literature makes clear that inflicting pain on an adversary's civilian population rarely causes a rival government to throw up its hands and surrender to the attacker's demands. On the contrary, the victims usually direct their anger at the attacker and, if anything, they become more supportive of their own government. Indeed, Israel had twice before launched large-scale bombing campaigns against Lebanon—Operation Accountability in 1993 and Operation Grapes of Wrath in 1996—and both failed to damage Hezbollah in any meaningful way or undermine its popular support. The IDF got the same outcome in the summer of 2006.

Faced with a failing air war in late July, the Olmert government decided to rectify the problem by sending large numbers of ground troops into Lebanon, claiming that

**Israel would need a few more weeks to defeat Hezbollah once and for all. But this was another fools' errand. After all, the IDF had fought Hezbollah in southern Lebanon between 1982 and 2000, and Hezbollah had not only survived, it eventually forced Israel to withdraw from Lebanon in 2000. How was Israel now going to achieve in a few weeks what it could not accomplish in eighteen years? The ground offensive failed to produce decisive results and Israel had no choice but to accept a ceasefire on August 14. Israel, in fact, suffered its highest single day of casualties two days before the ceasefire went into effect.**

**Israel's actions were not only strategically foolish, but they also violated the laws of war. Amnesty International, for example, concluded in a report a few months after the war ended that: "Israeli forces committed serious violations of international human rights and humanitarian law, including war crimes. In particular, Amnesty International has found that Israeli forces carried out indiscriminate and disproportionate attacks on a large scale."**

**One might think that I am being unduly harsh on Israel for starting a war that it was doomed to lose, but the Olmert government set up an official commission to study the war – the Winograd Commission – and it reached essentially the same conclusions that I laid out above.**

**For example, it found that Israel's response reflected "weakness in strategic thinking," and that Israel's leaders had "failed to adapt the military way of operations and its goals to the reality on the ground," and pursued goals that were "not clear and could not be achieved." Moreover, the Winograd Commission found that, "There were those in the IDF high command, joined by some in the political echelon, who entertained a baseless hope that the capabilities of the air force could prove decisive in the war."**

**The Winograd Commission was reluctant to delve into charges that Israel violated international law because it saw these issues as "part of a political and propaganda**

war against the state” of Israel. Nevertheless, it did note that Israel’s extensive use of cluster bombs in southern Lebanon did not conform to international law.

This harsh indictment of Israeli policy during the Lebanon war raises the obvious question: what were leaders around the world, especially in the US, saying about Israel’s policies during its 34-day conflict in Lebanon? Although hardly anyone challenged Israel’s right to respond to Hezbollah’s raid, or to defend itself, its excessive response was widely condemned around the globe. But, of course, that was not true in the US.

The Bush administration provided Israel with extraordinary diplomatic protection. Indeed, instead of trying to shut the war down quickly – which would have saved Israeli lives – the US helped prolong it by delaying a UN Security Council ceasefire resolution. The US also resupplied Israel with “smart bombs” during the fighting, thereby providing direct support for Israel’s misguided strategy. Meanwhile, back in Washington, Democrats and Republicans competed to show that their party, not the rival one, was Israel’s best friend. One Jewish activist said that he thought that “it’s a good thing to have members of Congress outdo their colleagues by showing that their pro-Israeli credentials are stronger than the next guy’s.”

The critical question here is whether Israel’s best interests were served during the Lebanon war by having the US back it unconditionally. The issue is not whether Israel had the right to respond to Hezbollah’s provocations; the question is whether the response it chose was smart and likely to work. Israelis and their American supporters certainly believed that the special relationship was an enormous plus for Israel. But is that true? Did it make good sense from Israel’s perspective to have the US act as a cheerleader while it pursued a bankrupt policy in Lebanon? Would it not have been better for Israel if there had been an open discourse here in the US about Israel’s conduct of the war, where critics were free to make their case? Might Israel have come up with a better strategy if it had not taken US support for granted? Would it not have been better for Israel if the Bush administration had

been better able to exercise independent judgment and put pressure on Israel both before and during the war? I think that the answers to these questions are obvious.

Let me turn to an even more important case for Israel – American support for its policies in the Occupied Territories. I will address a simple question: has that support – which clearly derives from the special relationship – been in Israel’s interest, or would it have been better for Israel if the US had pressured it to stop building settlements and allow for the creation of a viable Palestinian state?

As things now stand, it is hard to see how there can be a meaningful two-state solution. The root of the problem is that the Israelis control large portions of the West Bank, and they show little interest in giving that land to the Palestinians. To be more specific, there is little public support, not to mention elite support in Israel, for the famous “Clinton parameters” of December 2000, which are the only realistic basis for creating a viable Palestinian state. And there is little reason to think that this situation is going to change anytime soon. The US is certainly not going to put pressure on Israel to leave the West Bank as long as the special relationship is in place. Israel will therefore continue building roads and settlements on the West Bank, while the US continues to support it unconditionally.

This discussion raises the obvious question: what does Israel’s future look like in the absence of separate Jewish and Palestinian states living side-by-side? Given present circumstances, there are three possible alternatives, all of which involve creating a “greater Israel,” which means an Israel that effectively controls both the West Bank and Gaza.

In the first scenario, “greater Israel” could become a democratic bi-national state in which both Palestinians and Israeli Jews enjoy equal political rights. This solution has been suggested by a handful of Jews and a growing number of Palestinians. The practical obstacles to this option are daunting, however, and bi-national states do not have an encouraging track record. Moreover, this option means abandoning the

original Zionist vision of a Jewish state, since the Palestinians would eventually outnumber the Jews in greater Israel. There is little reason to think that Israel's Jewish citizens would voluntarily accept this solution, and one can also safely assume that Israel's supporters in America would have virtually no interest in this outcome.

Second, Israel could expel most of the Palestinians from "greater Israel," thereby preserving its Jewish character through an overt act of ethnic cleansing. Although a few Israeli hardliners have advocated variants on this approach, to do so would be a crime against humanity and no genuine friend of Israel could support such a heinous course of action. It is worth noting that there are almost 5.2 million Palestinians in the lands that would comprise "greater Israel," and they would surely put up fierce resistance if Israel tried to expel them from their homes. If this is what opponents of a two-state solution are advocating, they should say so explicitly. This form of ethnic cleansing would not end the conflict, however; it would merely reinforce the Palestinians' desire for vengeance and strengthen those extremists who still oppose Israel's existence.

The final alternative, which is the most likely, is some form of apartheid, whereby Israel continues to increase its control over the Occupied Territories, but allows the Palestinians to exercise limited autonomy in a set of disconnected and economically crippled statelets. Israelis – and their American supporters – invariably bristle at the comparison to white rule in South Africa, but that is the future they face if they try to incorporate the Occupied Territories into Israel while denying full political rights to an Arab population that will soon outnumber the Jewish population in the entirety of the land. Prime Minister Ehud Olmert said as much when he recently proclaimed that if "the two-state solution collapses," Israel will "face a South-African-style struggle." He went so far as to argue that, "as soon as that happens, the state of Israel is finished." Similarly, Israel's vice prime minister said earlier this year that, "the occupation is a threat to the existence of Israel." Other Israelis,

as well as Jimmy Carter and Bishop Desmond Tutu, have warned that continuing the occupation will turn Israel into an apartheid state.

Of course, the apartheid option is not a viable long-term solution either, because it is morally repugnant and because the Palestinians will continue to resist until they get a state of their own. This situation will force Israel to escalate the repressive policies that have already cost it significant blood and treasure, encouraged political corruption, and badly tarnished its global image.

These three possibilities are the only alternatives to a two-state solution, and no one who wishes Israel well should be enthusiastic about any of them. Thus, I ask: would it not have been better for Israel if the US had long ago pressured it to stop building settlements and allow for the creation of a viable Palestinian state? But this did not happen – and it will not happen – because the special relationship makes it impossible for American leaders to use the leverage at their disposal to bring this tragic conflict to an end.

Some of you might concede that there is some truth in what I have said, but argue that I have missed the real reason for the special relationship. For example, some might say it is still necessary because Israel is still a tiny “David” surrounded by Arab “Goliaths,” and its survival would be in jeopardy in the absence of generous and unconditional US support.

But this is simply not true, as the historical record makes clear. Remember, there was no special relationship between 1948 and 1967. In fact, the US gave Israel relatively little economic and military aid during the first two decades of its existence. Nevertheless, Israel handily defeated the Palestinians and five Arab armies in 1948, routed the Egyptians in 1956, and trounced the Egyptians, the Jordanians and the Syrians in a mere six days in 1967. Since its founding, Israel has been the real Goliath in its neighborhood, and that situation would not change if Washington treated Israel as a normal country, which, by the way, does not mean

that the US would cut off aid to Israel or sit idly by if its survival was threatened. Finally, Israel has a formidable nuclear arsenal, which is the best guarantee of survival that a country can buy.

Another possible response to what I have said is to argue that a powerful moral rationale underpins the special relationship. Israel is said to be a democracy that shares America's values. Yes, Israel is a democracy, but so are many other states and none gets anywhere near as much support, much less unconditional support. The two countries certainly share some values, but not all. Israel is a Jewish state, and non-Jews there are second-class citizens in theory and in practice. The US, on the other hand, is a liberal democracy that works hard to treat all of its citizens equally. It certainly is not a Christian state that treats non-Christians – which would include Jews – as second-class citizens. Indeed, that kind of discrimination, which is part of Israel's essence, is antithetical to the American way of life. Furthermore, Israel's treatment of its Palestinian subjects in the Occupied Territories is sharply at odds with present US values.

I want to emphasize that there is a strong moral case for Israel's existence—based on the long history of anti-Semitism, but past crimes against the Jewish people do not justify giving Israel a blank check today – especially when doing so is in neither America's nor Israel's national interest.

My bottom line is that the US is in deep trouble in the Middle East – and has a serious terrorism problem – in good part because of its unconditional support for Israel. Moreover, the special relationship is helping Israel to turn itself into an apartheid state, which is likely to have terrible consequences for the Jewish state. All of you in the audience who care deeply about Israel should be horrified by this situation. Therefore, I maintain that it is time for the US to jettison this misguided policy and instead treat Israel as a normal country, which it is.

**Regarding Israel and the Palestinians, Washington should pursue an even-handed policy toward the two sides. It should act as an honest broker. In particular, the US should make it clear to Israel that it must abandon the Occupied Territories and allow for the creation of a viable Palestinian state on those lands. Jerusalem should be told that the US will no longer tolerate Israel's colonial expansion in the West Bank; indeed, we will actively oppose it.**

**None of this is to say that the US should abandon Israel. On the contrary, the US should defend Israel's right to exist within its pre-1967 borders with some minor modifications. And most importantly, if Israel's survival is threatened, the US should come to its aid. Thank you and I hope that you will see fit to support the resolution before the house – for the good of America and for the good of Israel.**