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The Obstacle to Peace

Washington's Role as Israel's Enabler

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The persistence of the Israel-Palestine conflict together with its clash of civilizations subplot invites inquiry far beyond the simplistic explanation that it is about two peoples seeking to occupy the same land at the same time. It has spawned hundreds of books and articles, some well informed and others purely polemical. Scores of “experts,” most of whom are advocates for one side or the other, are part of a seemingly vast industry that seeks to understand what has happened in the past and tries to come to grips with what is currently taking place. Some pundits even look ahead, rejecting the view that the conflict is intractable and floating plans to bring about some kind of a solution that is acceptable to both sides as well as to the neighboring and sometimes not-so-neighboring governments that have inexorably been drawn in to the dispute.

Given the intense focus and the passions aroused by the conflict it is rare to find a book or article that says something new but Jeremy Hammond’s **Obstacle to Peace: The U.S. Role in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict** does just that, deconstructing the prevailing narrative on the Middle East while also explaining in meticulous and fully documented detail why and how a succession of United States administrations has actually become the greatest impediment to a just settlement that would benefit both Palestinians and Israelis. Washington, which pretends to be part of a possible solution, is actually the problem.

Hammond is an award winning investigative journalist and the editor of *Foreign Policy Journal*. Along the way to his central thesis his book provides an exhaustive history of the Israel-Palestine relationship which, to be sure, will interest many readers. But it is his insight into how Washington's blatant hypocrisy has been the most significant factor making peace between the two parties impossible that gets to the real heart of the matter.

The United States has for many years appeared to promote a peaceful and mutually beneficial "two state solution" to the conflict between Jews and Arabs. That in theory means that there should be two independent nations existing side by side, one made up largely of Palestinian Arabs and the other mostly consisting of Israeli Jews. That would seem to be a reasonable outcome and one that many fair minded individuals would comfortably endorse. Much of the world has, in fact, gone along with that formula, allowing the United States to take the lead in what have been remarkably unproductive peace talks.

Failure at the negotiating table has been largely due to the fact that there is a flaw in the arrangement, which is that Washington has gone along with and repeatedly echoes the Israeli insistence that both confidence building and final arrangements should be the product of bilateral negotiations between the two sides.

Tying all attempts at conflict resolution to obligatory bilateral negotiations mean that Israel has *de facto* been able to postpone any real movement towards a peace agreement and basically to reject the entire two state concept. Richard Falk describes the process as a "holding operation" that is not intended to produce results while the inexorable Israeli settling of the West Bank continues under the radar. That it works that way is because one side, the Israelis, representing a unified and powerful state that actually occupies much of the other side's territory, is able to call the shots, exercising its will relatively freely, accepting or refusing to accommodate even reasonable proposals by the Palestinian negotiators sitting across the table.

Even so, and in spite of the asymmetry in power, as it is in Israel's own long term interest to come to some kind of arrangement with the Palestinians, the two sides might well have taken reasonable steps to narrow the differences between themselves and move towards an agreement. That they did not come to an understanding was due to the other flaw in the arrangement, which was that Washington has never served as an even-handed broker between Palestinian and Israeli. It has always favored the latter, quite understandably, reflective of the powerful Jewish interests in the United States versus the almost non-existent and essentially voiceless Arab-American lobby. The bond between Washington and Tel Aviv has frequently been described as a "special relationship" even though it does not commit Israel in any way to take any action favored by Washington. Quite the contrary in reality, but the belief on the part of many Establishment Americans that there is something "special" persists, frequently embellished with other fulsome expressions like "greatest ally" and "best friend."

Washington knows very well but will never acknowledge that phony peace talks provide cover for Israeli expansion on the ground that will make a Palestinian state impossible to achieve. Indeed, Israel could not possibly continue its settlement policy, which is opposed by nearly all the world, without American tacit support. And the White House's role as

Israel's patron and *de facto* collaborator has materially affected the ongoing discussion on what to do in a number of other ways. It has, for example, effectively empowered the political hard right wing in Israel by permitting Tel Aviv to take popular but extreme positions knowing that there will be no consequences.

Washington has also framed the actual peace talks, when they occur, in such a way as to always turn back to the "negotiations between the two sides" formula which puts the control back in Israel's hands. Regarding those negotiations, it never pressures Israel in any way and always claims to "have Israel's back." Even mild rebukes about new settlement building are always balanced and made irrelevant by simultaneously accusing the Palestinians of "creating obstacles" and "incitement."

Beyond its own internal discipline on the issue, the United States will not allow anyone else to pressure Israel either. It has blocked attempts by the Palestinians to upgrade their status in the United Nations or to obtain access to the International Criminal Court. Congress and the White House have both together and individually taken steps to sanction perfectly legal and non-violent Palestinian attempts to put economic pressure on Israel through the Boycott, Divest and Sanction (BDS) movement.

Hammond sees a Washington that has been so thoroughly subverted by Israeli interests that it has no wiggle room to behave independently on any issue viewed as important to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. By using its United Nations veto the State Department has consistently provided Israel with protective political cover whenever it behaves badly, insuring that there will be no consequences whatsoever if the Netanyahu government continues to steal Arab land and expand its own authority on the West Bank. Protecting Israel is the norm even when its actions damage actual American interests. When General David Petraeus **spoke candidly** in 2010, saying that Israel's treatment of the Palestinians was endangering American soldiers operating in the Middle East, he was quickly forced to recant.

Hammond also examines in some detail the role of the U.S. punditry and media in sustaining the imbalance in the public perception about Israel vs. Palestine. Israel's actual language and its propagandistic viewpoint in describing the conflict are adopted not only by the federal government but also by mainstream journalists and think tank "experts." As Hammond puts it, "they choose not to see" that the entire two-state formula is a sham deliberately intended to serve as a delaying tactic. As part of the process Arabs are regularly diminished as human beings, invariably being described in negative terms, suggesting that they have to somehow politically mature if they ever want to achieve statehood. Those Palestinians who are brave enough to attack Israeli soldiers are always described as "terrorists," which resonates with a western audience that both associates terror with Muslims and is predisposed to be fearful of attacks at home sourced to the instability in the Middle East.

In the U.S. media the illegal Israeli occupation of much of the West Bank and nearly all of East Jerusalem is rarely mentioned and the right of an occupied people to resist under international law is never discussed. And when peace talks inevitably break down it is always because Israel "has no one to negotiate with" or "because the Palestinians have

turned down a generous offer” or have been “rejectionist” not because Israel has a vested interest in jawing interminably while it continues to build settlements that create facts on the ground that will eventually be used to justify a takeover of nearly all the West Bank.

Hammond demonstrates how the Israeli-U.S.-media nexus works in practice in relationship to the devastating 2008-9 Operation Cast Lead attack on Gaza. Israel provoked the crisis, announced that diplomatic options had broken down, applied more pressure until there was a response, and then exercised an overwhelming military option, **killing 1400 Gazans** including possibly as many as 400 children. The U.S. government supported the Israeli action as “going after terrorists” and “legitimate defense” while the mainstream media followed suit. Bear in mind that Gaza had no army of any kind and its vulnerable civilians had virtually no means to resist the Israeli attack, which included a number of documented war crimes.

Jeremy Hammond’s **website** includes additional reviews and commentary on *Obstacles to Peace*. He has written his book in an attempt to inform the American public about what is really going on in the Middle East. He seeks to empower his fellow citizens to emphatically reject the actions of the government, the mainstream media and the host of think tank experts who have pretty much had things their own way for fifty years. May he find success. To my mind his book is essential reading on Israel-Palestine, joining the classic John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt **The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy**, Steven Sniegoski’s **The Transparent Cabal** and Alison Weir’s **Against Our Better Judgement**. The only thing still missing is an in-depth exploration of the actual damage that Israel has done to the United States with its spying, technology theft, subornation of congress and generally parasitic behavior. I might write that one.