The Israelisation of America

The US's unqualified backing of Israel goes back a long way, but, writes Ahdaf Soueif*, **9/11 was the neo-cons' chance to take it one step further: full identification**

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Once again it's funny mirrors time. The world watches the events taking place in Palestine, and Western media see one process taking place while the Arabs generally see another.

Interpreting these events is largely a matter of how you view the relationship between the USA and Israel. A few weeks ago I heard a well-known British columnist say he was sick of being told that the Palestinian/Israeli conflict was the 'litmus test' for how people can expect the American Imperium to influence the world. Yet "Freedom for Palestine" was the demand on millions of the banners in the anti-war demonstrations that swept the world last February.

America's support for Israel dates to the beginning of the Zionist project in the late 19th century and grew stronger throughout the 20th. From 1949 to the present, for every dollar the US spent on an African, it spent $250.65 on an Israeli, and for every dollar it spent on someone from the Western Hemisphere outside the US, it spent $214 on an Israeli. As Israel grows stronger the support becomes more solid. According to Stephen Zunes, chair of the Peace and Justice Studies Programme at San Francisco University, "99 per cent of all US aid to Israel took place after the 1967 War."

In the United Nations the US has used its veto against 34 resolutions related to the Arab/Israeli conflict.

US support for Israel has involved turning a blind eye not only to Israeli flouting of international law, but to Israeli anti- American activities such as: spying (Jonathan Jay Pollard 1985 and David Tenenbaum 1997), selling arms to China (1990 onwards), espionage against American companies (cited in the *Wall Street Journal*, 1992) and attacks on the dignity and the lives of American subjects as in the bombing of the USS Liberty in 1967, the beating by Israeli police of David Muirhead who was working on an American- financed project to restore the main street in Al-Khalil (Hebron) in 1997, the turning back of a US Congressional delegation from the Allenby Bridge in August 2002 and, in April, the Israeli army's shooting of peace activist Brian Avery in Jenin and its killing of Rachel Corrie in Rafah.

Washington matches actions with words. On 18 May 2000, the Democratic

candidate for the presidency, Al Gore, addressing the powerful pro-Israeli Washington lobby, AIPAC, was able to say: "The United States has an absolute, uncompromising commitment to Israel's security and an absolute conviction that Israel alone must decide the steps necessary to ensure that security. That is Israel's prerogative. We accept that. We endorse that. Whatever Israel decides cannot, will not, will never, not ever, alter our fundamental commitment to her security."

You might have thought support couldn't come much stronger. But the group now known as the 'neo-cons', who became established in George W Bush's administration, were waiting for a chance to demonstrate higher levels of commitment. The policies they dreamed of before coming to power are well-documented. They were handed the opportunity to leverage these policies into action by the murderous attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon on the morning of 11 September 2001. That day four major Israeli politicians, Shimon Peres, Ariel Sharon, Ehud Barak and Benyamin Netanyahu, took to the TV screens to assert that the terror just suffered by the Americans was the identical terror endured by Israel since its establishment -- to drive home the point Israel had been pushing for years: that Israel's enemies were America's enemies.

But this was not always the case. Arabs (and some Israelis) believe that without American support Israel would have had to reach a just accommodation with the Palestinians. But since the '60s at least the yardstick used by the US to measure the acceptability/goodness of an Arab country has been its government's stance towards Israel. The softer the stance the more 'moderate' or 'friendly' the country has been considered. It therefore came as a shock to the US public that the 19 hijackers who crashed aeroplanes into the Trade Towers and the Pentagon with such deadly results were from Egypt and Saudi-Arabia: countries regarded as 'moderate'. The true albeit unpopular answer to this puzzle is that the more friendly, (ie subservient) a regime is to an America which so identifies itself with (an intransigent) Israel the harder that regime has had to oppress its own people and to close off all their legitimate means of political opposition. This is possibly one of the most terrible effects the American- Israeli alliance has had on the Arab world: that most of the Arab men and women who could have played important roles in developing their countries' civil and political institutions have been de-activated. Some have ended up feeling that the only path left open to them is the path of extremism clothed in the robes of what is now called 'militant Islam'.

These processes are absent from any discussion of America's relationship with the Arabs. So, in the *New Yorker*, for example, Seymour Hersch can give a detailed analysis of the internal problems of Saudi Arabia without ever touching on why a 'nationalist' government in Saudi might be unenthusiastic about selling oil to America. This holds for practically all the mainstream media in the US. The support of America for Israel has been likened to the elephant in the drawing-room; everybody sees it but nobody mentions it.

Any discussion of America's relationship with the Arabs therefore has an elephant- sized hole at its heart. And pundits come forward to fill the hole with chatter about the 'innate hostility' of the Arabs to the US or the 'nihilism' of the terrorists or the 'fanatical nature' of Islam. Debate is reduced to 'they hate us because we are rich/free/ democratic/unveiled.'

Most of the US administration's and media's information on the Arabs is now derived from the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), co-founded by Meyrav Wurmser, director of the Centre for Middle East Policy at the Hudson Institute. According to the *Guardian*, MEMRI is connected with Israeli Army Intelligence and feeds the media and politicians with highly selective quotations from extreme Arab publications.

The proposition put forward by the USA and Israel today is that they share common values -- basically a commitment to freedom and democracy. American politicians are constantly upping the rhetoric on the indivisibility of America and Israel:

"... in war and peace, the United States has stood proudly at Israel's side. Our two nations and peoples are bound together by our common democratic values and traditions. So it has been for over 50 years. So it will always be," Secretary of State Colin Powell to AIPAC, 30 March, 2003.

Next day:

"As always, there are some, here and abroad, who would drive a wedge between America and Israel. But to do so would be to separate America from its best self... our commitment to Israel grows from our duty to preserve the great heritage of liberty and democracy of which we are the most fortunate heirs and the most powerful defenders," Senate Democratic Leader Tom Daschle to AIPAC, 31 March, 2003.

In this view America and Israel's love of liberty and democracy earn them the hatred of what prominent neo-cons have called the 'uncivilised' part of the world. The only way to end this 'hatred' is through a civilising mission; a process which the US has now started in Iraq. This can be seen as a logical move within long-term Israeli strategy. Israel has always sold itself to the West on the basis of the state's oppositional relationship to its chosen environment. Herzl assured the British Foreign Office at the end of the 19th century that Israel would provide a civilised bulwark against the barbarian hordes of Islam. Today, Israel's image is of a beacon of civilisation and, increasingly, America's only trustworthy friend in the region.

While some US policies (notably re the environment and trade) and the increasingly murky revelations about the links between corporate America and its government make much of the world deeply uneasy, America's unwavering

support for Israel has implicated it in a whole range of behaviours which have brought its modus operandi very close to its protégé's; in the past two years the United States has joined Israel in:

- manipulating or side-lining international institutions

- ignoring accepted principles of international law (eg setting up Guantanamo Bay, sanctioning assassinations world- wide)

- ignoring accepted principles of human rights (eg carrying out illegal detentions including the detention of children, condoning the use of torture)

- adopting military policies to achieve its political ends, embracing a policy of 'preventive' war

- moving to curtail the civil rights of its own citizens (eg The Patriot Act)

- encouraging the media to adopt government views and attempting to gag media which is not their own

Meanwhile the voice of the Christian Right has moved in from the margins and the discourse of this Right and of members of the administration has become less guarded in its jingoism and its racism.

The US administration has now joined Israel in presenting itself as engaged in an existential war. Both states promote images of themselves as nations injured to a point of no return -- Israel by the Holocaust and America by 11 September. In justifying the current war George W Bush said it would be "suicidal" of the US not to attack Iraq.

The injury done them and the danger they are in justify putting aside institutions, concepts, ways of being that have taken centuries to evolve and from which they themselves -- paradoxically -- continue (in their own eyes) to derive their legitimacy. The paradox is accommodated in the image of the 'tough' but 'reluctant' fighter who takes up arms with a heavy heart because he has no other choice. Both countries evoke a national psychology which needs (for the sake of survival) to overcome a kind of wimpishness.

For Zionism the wimpishness is that of the Diaspora Jews -- who finally 'allowed themselves' to be destroyed. For Americans it's the fallout from guilt over Vietnam.

Americans and Israelis also seem to share a view of themselves as a 'chosen' people. In Israel's case this is through the Covenant. In America's case a recent poll confirmed that 92 per cent of those polled believed that God "personally and individually loved them". To be American is to be Good. We now hear talk of a

'shared mission' as in House Republican leader Tom DeLay's speech at Boca Raton (on the occasion of the death of the astronauts -- among them the Israeli Ilan Ramon) in which he talked of a destiny shared by America and Israel and asked for divine assistance in protecting both. (*Newsweek*, 2/6/2003).

In this fight for their existence; the Battle between Good and Evil, there are no middle grounds, no critical stances. You are either "with us" or "against us". Americans who are not "with" the United States' official policy are traitors, non-Americans are enemies. Jews who are not "with" Israeli policy are self- haters, non-Jews are anti- Semitic. "Enemies" and "anti- Semites" are of course beyond negotiation or toleration; they have to be annihilated.

Americans on the whole appear genuinely uncomfortable being at odds with Israel. Israeli transgressions, injustices etc cannot be discussed as freely as those of any other country. Indeed it seems almost in bad taste to express any reservations about the 'only democracy' in the Arab region.

You can decry the absence of practical equality between black and white people in the USA, or talk about the history and plight of the country's Native Americans but it is a terrible faux pas to mention that Israel, by law, is not the same state for its Muslim and Christian citizens as it is for its Jewish ones.

It is possible that underlying this unease is the need to believe in the essential 'goodness' of Israel, a corollary of its 'moral' (as distinct from its de facto) right to exist. The intellectual inconsistency between deploring Israel's actions in the West Bank and Gaza today and applauding the even more extreme actions it took in the region in 1948 and the years leading up to it must be deeply problematic.

In this context one should note National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice's words in her May interview with Israel's daily *Yediot Aharonot*: "I have a deep affinity with Israel. I have always admired the history of the State of Israel and the hardness and determination of the people that founded it."

Any discussion of this issue feeds into the perception that the very existence of Israel is under threat. This is as patently absurd as the claim that Iraq under Saddam Hussein presented an existential threat to the United States. And yet it is the perception encouraged by the governments of both countries to mobilise their own people and to panic them. World media has carried pictures of Americans rushing to buy plastic sheeting and duct tape (to the financial advantage of one of the contributors to the Republican Party) and Israelis in sealed rooms strapping gas masks onto babies' faces -- with all the allusions to the horrors of the Nazi gas chambers that this must evoke.

This poisoned view of the world could not have been promoted without the collusion of the media. Yet now the protest movements within the USA and Israel

may be forcing parts of the media to re-examine their stance.

Ha'aretz, in Israel, has for some time been providing a platform for dissident Israeli journalists like Gideon Levy, Uri Avnery and Amira Hass.

A fledgling Berkley outfit called "If Americans Knew" have just published a piece in the *Bay Guardian* showing that the *San Francisco Chronicle* is 20 times more likely to report on the deaths of Israeli children killed in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict than it is to cover Palestinian children's deaths.

The US- and Israeli-professed love of liberty and commitment to human values, betrayed by the governments of both countries, is now demonstrating itself powerfully in the actions of their people and fuelling an important grass-roots dissidence. In two notable recent acts Professor Ilan Pappe of Haifa University has called for a boycott of Israeli institutions because of the increased restrictions placed on civil and academic freedoms, and the president of Johns Hopkins University has used his Commencement Address to warn of the dangers to American society from the Patriot Act. But the most touching and heartening example is the movement of the Israeli soldiers refusing to uphold the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. They now number over 1100.

Is it fanciful to suggest that the awakening of the world to the Palestinian/Israeli conflict has been -- at least in part -- an effect of the 'Likudisation' of the politics of the USA? And is it naïve to hope that Israeli and American citizens with a true commitment to democracy and freedom may put a stop to this process before it destroys us all? And is it cynical to see more hope in this than in what is taking place now on the shores of the Red Sea?