

# **U.S. MIDDLE EAST POLICY AND THE ISRAELI SETTLEMENTS**

By George McGovern

AMEU's Public Affairs Series #32  
January 1992

**Americans for Middle East Understanding, Inc.**  
475 Riverside Drive, Room 245  
New York, New York 10115-0245  
Tel. 212-870-2053  
Fax: 212-870-2050

*Senator George McGovern represented South Dakota in the U.S. House of Representatives (1956-60) and the Senate (1962-80). He was a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and chairman of its subcommittees on African Affairs and the Middle East. In 1972, he was the nominee of the Democratic party for president. Senator McGovern has just assumed the presidency of the Middle East Policy Council (formerly the American-Arab Affairs Council, on whose Board of Directors he served from 1986-1991). The following is the text of his banquet address to the annual conference of the Middle East Institute in Washington, D. C., October 4, 1991, at the National Press Club.*

## **U.S. MIDDLE EAST POLICY AND THE ISRAELI SETTLEMENTS**

By George McGovern

A significant event happened in early September, at the end of a year of extraordinary events in international relations. An American president stood up against the powerful lobby for Israel and announced, to quote the late Dr. Seuss, "I mean what I said and I said what I mean"—land for peace, just as it is laid out in U.N. Security Council Resolution 242. This has been acknowledged by all six U.S. presidents who have served since 242 was passed in 1967, with the endorsement of the entire international community, to be the basis of peace between Israel and the Arabs.

An exchange of the occupied territories in return for recognition of Israeli sovereignty inside the Green Line marking the pre-1967 border should have happened at the end of the Six-Day War. But negotiations were postponed, for various reasons, in the wake of that overwhelming Israeli victory. Israel didn't have to com-

promise because the United States failed to stand firmly on international principle. We believed that accommodating Israel was an advantage to the United States in an arena of superpower competition where many Arab states and political forces were ranged in the Soviet camp. Whatever Israel wanted was seen as in the U.S. national interest or—more likely—impossible to change without alienating the Israelis and their powerful and well-organized friends in the United States.

Such a shortsighted policy was, in hindsight, against the interests of everybody—the Arab states, Israel, the United States and, most of all, the Palestinians—because it denied the only practical basis for a just settlement: self-determination for the people living on the land seized by the Israeli army in 1967.

It is rare when the Congress goes along with the president instead of doing what is expected by the Israel lobby, but that is what has happened regarding the withholding of loan guarantees to Israel. Members of Congress know that the American people (80 percent in a recent poll)

overwhelmingly support the president. This includes a large number of American Jews who are appalled by the Shamir government's treatment of the Palestinians.

### **ISRAELI TREATMENT OF PALESTINIANS**

There is no denying the effects of Israeli policy now that national television has transmitted pictures of the breaking of Palestinian detainees' bones by Israeli soldiers. It is common knowledge now that Israel uses collective punishment on Palestinians—blowing up Palestinian homes, closing Palestinian universities, uprooting Palestinian olive groves, rotating in and out of prison a whole generation of young Palestinian men.

Some facts, however, are not well known to Americans. For example, in the Gaza Strip, a seething ghetto of 700,000 Palestinians, where 2,500 settlers now reside, the Israeli government has appropriated over two-thirds of the land and one-third of the water. In the West Bank, where Israeli settlers comprise 5 percent of the population, Israel has claimed more than half the land and 35 percent of

the water. An additional 35 percent of the water of the West Bank is piped out for the use of Israeli citizens.

The discrimination against Palestinians in Israel is shocking to those of us who have been supporters of Israel over the years. Palestinians are taxed, yet they receive almost no services, in a country which is a generous welfare state for Jews. Palestinian universities and schools are closed by the authorities arbitrarily. Palestinian publications are censored. Certain Palestinian songs are banned. Making the V-sign or showing the Palestinian flag are criminal acts. Detention without charge is commonplace. Even torture is apparently routine.

An article published in May in the Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz* and reprinted in translation under the title "On Gaza Beach" in *The New York Review of Books* shocked and moved all who read it.

Israeli reservist Ari Shavit, on guard duty in Gaza Prison, describes what he hears there—the screams of tortured Palestinians, to put it simply. He writes about himself and virtually

every able-bodied man in Israel who has served in the army of occupation over the past three years:

"You are complicit. And now, when the screams are dying down, when they are turning into ... whimpers, sobs, you know that from this moment forth, nothing will be as it was before. Because a person who has heard the screams of another person, is another person. Whether he does anything about it or not.... Even if you plug your ears, you go on hearing."

Emotionally, as a longtime supporter of Israel, and an admirer of its religious and political ideals, I do not want to accept these facts. But the evidence is overwhelming and undeniable. The excuse is always that Israel is at war, fighting for its life. Well, it won't wash anymore, even among American Jews.

### **MANIPULATION OF GUILT**

Prime Minister Shamir has tried to manipulate Jewish Americans into supporting his settlements policy by playing on their guilt for not having done enough for their European co-religionists trying to flee from the Na-

zis. Speaking in Paris a few weeks before Israel asked for the loan guarantees, Shamir predicted that his American supporters would be able to circumvent the president's resistance through exerting their power over Congress. For the first time that tactic is not working.

The Likud government tried to make Soviet Jewish immigration a humanitarian issue behind which it could hide its ideologically motivated plans for territorial expansion. After convincing the Congress to make it difficult for Soviet Jews to immigrate to the United States and thereby force them to go to Israel, Mr. Shamir criticized the United States for not being sufficiently humanitarian, invoking the debt owed to the Jews for the Nazi Holocaust.

This exploitation of the Hitler-led tragedy in Europe for the purpose of obtaining U.S. loan guarantees which would promote the swelling of Jewish settlements did not achieve its desired end. It perhaps even served to remind Americans of the real humanitarian issue—the horrors of occupation in the territories.

## **GREEN LINE "ERASED"**

At the ribbon-cutting ceremony for a new settlement just inside the Green Line, Prime Minister Shamir said that the Green Line has been erased by the Jewish settlements. Israel may agree to stop building new settlements but continue thickening existing settlements across the Green Line. This might conform to the letter of the law yet enable Israel to settle Jews at will in the territories. Since most housing in Israel other than the heavily subsidized units in the settlements is inadequate and expensive, the settlements are very attractive to average Israelis, not just to ideologues and new immigrants.

If the Likud government has in fact erased the Green Line, it means that Israel has become an outlaw state, defying the Fourth Geneva Convention, which prohibits colonizing conquered territory through settlement. The allies who defeated Germany and Japan did not settle their people in the territories they occupied at the end of the war. The United States fought a cold war partly to block possible Soviet acquisition of conquered European territory.

Some observers believe that it may soon be too late—if indeed it is not already too late—to achieve a trade of the occupied territories for concessions from the Arab states. They see the West Bank divided into Palestinian cantons with only the power to manage local affairs. Stephen Rosenfeld, responding to the difficult question of where we go from here, suggests in *The Washington Post* of September 26, letting the Israeli settlers stay in their new homes, but giving the Palestinians the right to return to the land of their forebears too—inside the now-erased Green Line.

Instead of building a wall between the two peoples, Mr. Rosenfeld seems to be suggesting a secular state in all of Palestine, the PLO dream which that organization was forced to repudiate. Yasser Arafat formally put the idea to rest in the fall of 1988, when he recognized Israel. But if the Zionist dream of an independent Jewish state is to be a permanent reality, Israel will have to settle for a state inside the Green Line.

## **TERRITORY FOR LEGITIMACY?**

The fall of the Soviet empire has

accelerated the move by Soviet leadership to recognize Israel. The former East bloc and the Third World countries considered part of the Soviet orbit over the past generation will probably follow suit, if the Arab states and the Palestinians recognize Israel. It is ironic that today most of the world recognizes or is ready to recognize the Israel demarcated by the Green Line, just at the moment when Yitzhak Shamir declares the Green Line to have been erased. This would make it impossible for Israel to achieve what it has always wanted—legitimacy, and security as a member of the world community.

It would actually be more accurate to describe what should be traded between the Israelis and the Palestinians as territory for legitimacy rather than land for peace. Israel already has the sort of peace that the strong can impose on the weak. It has the deterrent of its own powerful army backed by the United States.

But Israel has always demanded the "right" to exist, not just acknowledgment of the fact of its existence. This has been interpreted by many Palestinians as a demand that they

concede that Israel had a right to take away their land. From its inception, Israel has wanted recognition—legitimacy—from the Arabs and the rest of the world. It is not a typical state, accepted by all as a nation comprising its citizens. Israel is a creation of the United Nations, owing its birth to the unique circumstances following World War II.

The Palestinian Arabs who were driven into exile when Israel was formed did not accept this catastrophe as legitimate. But over the years they have come to accept reality—Israel is here to stay. The Palestinians have had to adjust and move on. It took a series of terrible defeats and the day-to-day punishment of the occupation as well as the psychological struggle epitomized by the intifada for the Palestinians to decide that they would settle for whatever part of the occupied territories Israel was willing to yield. Now it appears that Israel is not willing to withdraw from any of the territories and, further, that Israeli settlements will be pushed, in Mr. Shamir's words, "to the end of the horizon."

This means that Israel is becom-

ing, by the deliberate design of its government, a binational state; a state in which there are two national groups, not side by side but one on top of the other. The comparison with South Africa is unavoidable.

### **U.S. WINKS AND NODS TO ISRAEL**

How did this happen? Where was Israel's generous benefactor the United States when our Israeli allies began heading down this self-destructive path? It seems clear that for the past decade the United States has been giving a wink and a nod to actions by Israel that have been potentially self-destructive; none more so than the settling of the West Bank.

The American government did not choose to pay attention to the problem of the settlements, what they meant to Israel and what they boded for an eventual negotiation between the Arabs and the Jewish state. President Reagan reversed President Carter's declaration that the settlements were illegal. The Reagan administration dropped efforts to promote compromise between the Arabs and the Israelis immediately after announcing its 1982 "fresh-start" initia-

tive following the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. While publicly reaffirming U.N. Resolution 242 to be the basis of any peace in the Middle East—American policy since 1967—the Reagan administration looked away as Israel continued to efface the Green Line and make division of the land impossible.

Now, in the afterglow of the Gulf War, Israel is assuming that the Arab governments will not deny themselves an opportunity to gain their own ends in negotiations just because of the Palestinians. Clearly, the Palestinians are out of favor now for having sided with Saddam Hussein. But, in spite of this, all the Arab governments have reiterated their support for Palestinian claims to the occupied territories.

The competing Israeli claim is that, since Jews have lived for thousands of years in the area we now call the West Bank, this gives modern Israel the right to control by force of arms the people who have been living there for the past 2,000 years of the Jewish diaspora. In 1975, when I first met Menachem Begin in Israel and asked him about his views on the West

Bank issue, he said: "There is no issue. As a student of the Bible you must surely know that God gave Judea and Samaria to his people, Israel." The settlers are the physical embodiment of this claim—"facts on the ground." The Israeli government knows how nearly impossible it would be to remove the ideologically motivated settlers. Would the United States be able to watch them carried out forcibly, as they were in the Sinai after the Camp David agreement?

### **MUTUAL DISHONESTY**

The witty and perceptive Abba Eban has said that a consensus exists when everyone is saying publicly what no one believes privately. The current sense of betrayal among insiders managing the U.S.-Israeli relationship illustrates Eban's epigram. Overt American policy has been U.N. Resolution 242 and land for peace, but privately we were reassuring Israeli leaders that we would not pressure them to compromise.

Recently Tom Friedman of *The New York Times* has written about the lack of private honesty between the American and Israeli govern-

ments. Both the United States and Israel will eventually have to follow their own interests, but they have not always admitted what their real interests and objectives were. As a long-time member of the U.S. Senate, I knew that many senators voting with the Israeli lobby did so with mounting personal resentment against the political pressure that overrode their real convictions. But these resentments and guilty consciences were not communicated to the Israelis, or to their Washington lobby. They saw only the vote count, which was always overwhelmingly in their favor.

The insistence of the Bush administration on the peace process underscores their political finesse—or perhaps their lack of political honesty, if you prefer Tom Friedman's interpretation. For example, administration strategists have apparently believed that if they could only get the Israelis into talks with the Arabs, the Arabs would demand an end to settlements without the United States itself having to stand up against Israel.

The Israelis convinced themselves that the United States would not stop them from pursuing their settlements

and territorial dreams because we had not honestly conveyed to them the depth of American opposition. Of course, President Bush had spoken against the settlements every time he met with Prime Minister Shamir, but American money continued to flow. The president and Secretary Baker probably thought the Israelis were taking seriously our opposition to the settlements as an obstacle to peace. But Israeli politicians now take for granted that American politicians will yield in the end to Israeli pressure.

Meanwhile year after year Israel remained far and away the largest recipient of U.S. foreign aid—over \$3 billion annually. When Israeli loans came due for American arms and other items, the loan repayments were frequently forgiven, thus adding to the already huge American aid program. No one stopped to define terms like peace and justice; it was politically too risky. Both sides preferred to wear masks. Now we know that both sides meant what they said; private conviction and public action match, making denial impossible.

## **NATIONAL INTERESTS WILL OUT**

Israel is a remarkable, even unique, nation. But it needs the United States more than the United States needs Israel. This was the case back in the 1950s, when President Eisenhower challenged the tax benefits of private contributions to Israel until it withdrew from the Suez, and it is true today, as our leaders now seem to recognize. The fact that the best thing Israel could do for the United States during the Gulf War was to lie low while the coalition was making its neighborhood safer illustrates the strategic realities now emerging in the Middle East.

President Bush has held up \$10 billion in loan guarantees to Israel for four months. It is implied that during those four months Israel will have to demonstrate that it deserves the aid by getting serious about peace with the Arab states surrounding it and the Palestinians living in the disputed territory. As it is unprecedented for the United States to require anything from Israel in return for American money, this delay indicates that aid to Israel is no longer sacrosanct.

Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Arens has said that the loan guarantees are not crucial to Israel, that they just mean the decrease of a few percentage points in interest and that Israel should forego the aid rather than put itself in the humiliating position of having to compromise on territory. Perhaps this is an appropriate reaction. But, if so, the United States should reassess its overall aid to Israel. Allowing Israel to work out its own destiny might require it to consider more carefully its territorial ambitions in terms of the cost of defense, social welfare, infrastructure, and debt service.

### **U.S. COMPLICITY**

Ariel Sharon has said, "Yugoslavia is exploding, the Soviet Union is disintegrating, Iraq is rebuilding its nuclear weapons program ... but the only problem which occupies the world is Tsur Yigal [the new settlement on the Green Line]." He does not seem to understand that the United States is concerned with the settlements because its tax dollars have enabled Israel to build these obstacles to our own policy of brokering a peace agreement between Israel and the

Arabs. Americans are culpable with Israelis for having financed the Israeli settlements and the oppressive military occupation that serve neither American nor Israeli ideals.

Israel and the United States have long had a special relationship, based on assumed common interests and a similar world view. The breach that the Likud settlements policy has produced makes life very difficult, both personally and professionally, for those in charge of managing the relationship between the two governments, Congress in particular. Congress has been Israel's enabler, to use a popular term from the psychology of addiction, abetting its self-destructive behavior out of the best of motives—and the worst.

For the 22 years that I served in Congress, like most of my colleagues, I supported Israel, out of a combination of conviction and self-interest. We were constantly aware of the power of the lobby for that country. Sometimes, against our best instincts, we bowed to pressure. Now, thanks in large part to the leadership of the president, more members of Congress may be

able to follow their consciences.

Not only will the Congress and the American taxpayer benefit from this independence—so will Israel. They have been led by extremists for too long. It is bad enough for the Israeli people to be led by their own ideologically motivated right wing. But for the American government to take instructions from that faction is insupportable.

For Israel to continue to be able to count on American support, its moral claims must take precedence over its very dubious strategic and ideological claims. It is when Israel is closest to the ethical principles of both Judaism and democracy that it most commands admiration from the American people. The renowned American Jewish violinist Yehudi Menuhin addressed the Knesset last May on the subject of Israel's moral quandary in terms so candid that the Israeli press didn't report his words to their readers. He said, in part:

"One fact is abundantly clear: This governing ... by fear, in contempt for the basic dignities of life, this steady asphyxiation of a dependent people

should be the very last means to be adopted by those who themselves know too well the awful significance, the unforgettable suffering of such an existence.... It is unworthy of my great people, the Jews, who have striven to abide by a code of moral rectitude for some 5,000 years."

To which I can only add, amen.