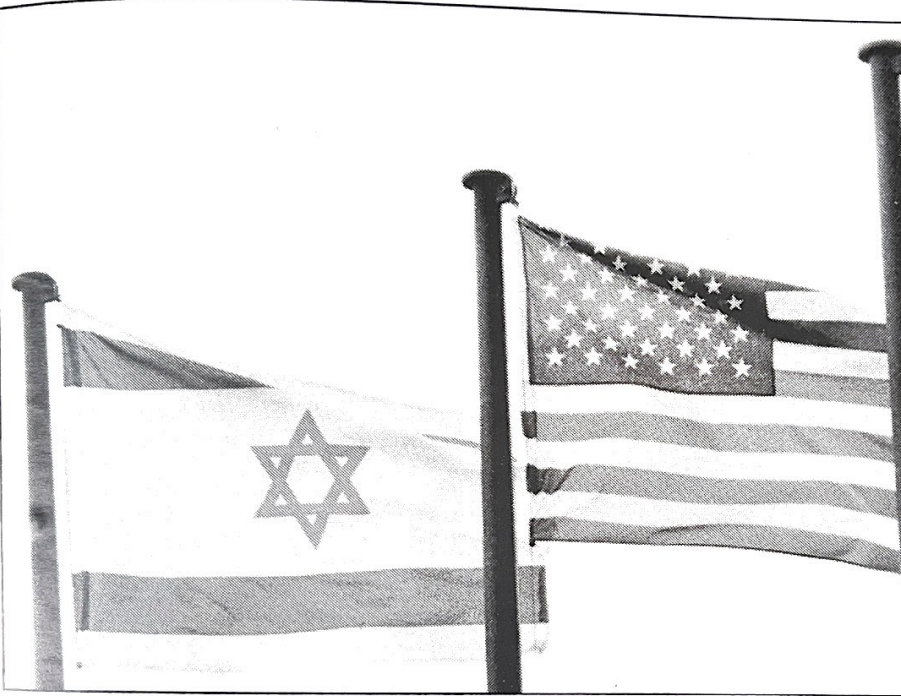


Is Israel out ?

The disintegration of Eastern Europe has led the USA to lose interest in the Middle East, argues Daniel Nassim

PHOTO: Simon Norfolk



The Middle East has been a major issue in superpower politics since the Second World War. As recently as October, George Bush and Mikhail Gorbachev came together in a blaze of publicity to host the first ever direct and public negotiations between Israel and a Palestinian delegation. By the time the third round of those same talks began in January, however, everything had changed. Gorbachev had disappeared from the world stage, Bush was off being ill in the Far East, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict had slipped a long way down the international agenda.

A year ago, as the Gulf War reached its climax, all eyes were on the Middle East. In the months that followed the conflict, US secretary of state James Baker shuttled endlessly back and forth, setting up the Arab-Israeli talks. Yet today the USA seems to have lost interest. The dramatic shift in America's priorities away from the Middle East cannot be attributed to simple boredom or frustration. It reflects the changes in world politics which have been catalysed by the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The priority which the USA gave to the Middle East in general, and to Israel in particular, was largely a product of the Cold War. The region was a key area of East-West tension, and Washington sponsored Israel as its main bulwark against Soviet-backed Arab nationalism. The collapse of the Soviet Union has ended that superpower

rivalry, and created a new area of international instability in Eastern Europe. As a consequence the Middle East now seems a less pressing concern for US foreign policy; and within the Middle East, Israel appears a far less important US ally.

After the Second World War, the USSR played a key role in cohering opposition to the USA and the West in the Middle East. Radical regimes and nationalist movements recognised the possibility of gaining some support from Moscow. The very existence of the Soviet Union provided an alternative model to the Western system. Of course, the Stalinists who ran the Soviet Union sought to manipulate the Arab peoples for their own ends. Nevertheless, their intervention in the Middle East did give added impetus to anti-Western Arab nationalism. In the fifties and sixties, Egypt and other Arab states formed close alliances with the Soviets.

It was in this context that Israel became important for the USA. In contrast to the Arab countries, Israel could be relied upon as a pro-Western stalwart. As a colonial settler state built on the back of the Palestinian nation it would always play a conservative role for Washington.

Israel's victory over its Arab neighbours in the 1967 Six Day War confirmed its status as the USA's most reliable ally—a role it continued to perform through the seventies and eighties. In 1976 Israel became the largest annual recipient of US foreign assistance. In 1981 all US economic aid

became grants rather than loans—saving Israel the need to repay the money. In 1985 all military aid was transformed into grants. Since 1967, total US aid to Israel—adjusted for inflation—has totalled at least \$77 billion; that is \$16 500 for every Israeli citizen.

The end of the Cold War has transformed both the role of Israel and the broader relationship of the West to the Middle East. By 1989 Israel was already becoming more of a liability than an asset to the USA, as Soviet decline opened new opportunities for the West to reforge its relationship with the Arab regimes.

After the Gulf War, in March 1991, *Living Marxism* noted that 'for the first time since 1948 there is a possibility of the USA trying to control events in the Middle East without using Israel as a central pillar of its policy'. At the time this caused considerable controversy. The USA and Israel still seemed inseparable to many. But in the past year relations between the two have deteriorated badly.

Upping the pressure

The main area of friction is over Israeli settlements in the West Bank, Gaza and the Golan Heights. The Israeli government, responding to pressure from tens of thousands of settlers and their supporters, has defied Washington by continuing to fund these settlements in the occupied territories. Israel's 1992 budget includes a sizeable provision for expanding the settlements.

America is no supporter of Palestinian liberation. But the settlements controversy has threatened to upset the USA's post-Gulf bid to tighten its grip on the Middle East through a new alliance with the Arab regimes. America has responded by stepping up the economic and diplomatic pressure on Israel. President Bush has publicly linked a \$10 billion loan guarantee, which Israel desperately needs to support a new wave of Soviet Jewish immigrants, to a freeze on new settlements. The USA has also leaked official reports which cast doubt on Israel's ability to service its foreign debt, as a way of increasing the pressure on Israel to toe Washington's line.

The USA has used other means to lean on Israel. For example, Seymour Hersh's recently published *The Samson Option*, undoubtedly written with CIA backing, contains many allegations that could be damaging to Israel. In Britain, allegations that Robert Maxwell worked for Israeli intelligence received most attention. But the claim that Israel's prime minister, Yitzhak Shamir, passed on US intelligence documents to Moscow is likely to prove more damaging. Such revelations would never have been allowed by the US authorities during the heyday of their alliance with Israel.

Political backwater

Israel's importance to the USA within the Middle East has been waning for a couple of years, as the Cold War came to an end. More recently, however, the American administration has downgraded the importance of Middle Eastern affairs altogether, as the collapse of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe brings fresh problems to the surface of international affairs. What was a crucial area of Western interest is now likely to become more of a political backwater.

The new focus of US foreign policy was clear by the time of the second round of Middle East talks in Washington in December. James Baker had spent months setting up these negotiations. Yet within a few days he had left the Arabs and Israelis to argue in a state department corridor, and jetted off to see Boris Yeltsin in Russia.

The shifting emphasis in US foreign policy confirms that the geopolitical considerations of American capitalism, rather than the Jewish lobby or any other incidental factor, will dictate what Washington does in the world.