

## INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON US-ISRAEL RELATIONS

# The Arab-Israel Conflict towards a Post-Obama Era



Book author Dr. Jonathan Rynhold of the BESA Center.

The conference looked at the domestic foundations of the US-Israel relationship, US foreign policy in the Middle East, and US-Israel relations into the future – towards a post-Obama era. A great deal of the discussion centered on the growing partisanship in US politics and in discussion of Israel – an issue that Dr. Rynhold studies closely in his new book.

In fact, Rynhold's book provides the most extensive account of how Americans have viewed Israel and the Arab-Israeli conflict since the end of the Cold War. On the one hand, American sympathy for Israel is extremely widespread and deeply rooted. Indeed, sympathy for Israel has surged to new heights in the 21st century in stark contrast to opinion in Europe. This is primarily in response to 9/11 and it has reinforced the underlying commitment to Israeli security.

On the other hand, Americans are increasingly divided about how to deal with the Arab-Israeli conflict and this division increasingly aligns with the major political, ideological and religious divides in America.

In his conference presentation, Rynhold focused on the differences between Republicans and Democrats. While

In May, the BESA Center held an international conference to mark publication of center associate Dr. Jonathan Rynhold's book *The Arab-Israel Conflict in American Political Culture* (Cambridge U. Press, 2015). The conference was cosponsored by the Argov Center for the Study of Israel and the Jewish People, headed by Dr. Rynhold.

sympathy for Israel over the Palestinians has grown among supporters of both parties, it has grown far more among Republicans. Moreover, a majority of Republicans believe that the Palestinians are mainly to blame for the conflict, that Israel's use of force against Hamas and Hezbollah is justified and that the US should side with Israel. They are divided about settlements.

In contrast, a majority of Democrats support Palestinian statehood and oppose settlements. A majority prefers that the US take an even-handed approach to the conflict, and they have been equivocal regarding Israel's use of force, and divided over whether the US should put more pressure on Israel or the Palestinians.

With the "millennial" generation increasingly liberal, how can Israel deal with this situation? "Bipartisanship remains critical to maintain the special relationship," Rynhold said. "In order to protect support among Democrats,

Israel needs to take care to protect its image as a democracy, while demonstrating a credible commitment to a two-state solution. That does not mean that Israel has to give in to all Palestinian demands and dismantle all settlements tomorrow. After all, the US has many other issues to deal with and there remain very strong concerns about the other side's commitment to peaceful coexistence. Nonetheless, expansion of settlements is viewed as challenging Israel's commitment to maintaining the possibility of a two-state solution, and is therefore to be avoided."

Mr. Elliott Abrams, former US Deputy National Security Advisor in the George W. Bush administration, agreed with Rynhold that it was important for Israel and for US-Israel relations to maintain some sort of ongoing peace diplomacy with the Palestinians. "Israel must always be seen as making efforts for peace, even if the chances of such are slim," he argued.



Ambassador Sallai Meridor, David M. Weinberg of the BESA Center, and Elliott Abrams.

Ambassador Sallai Meridor, former Israeli Ambassador to the US, added that by building in the settlements Israel was undermining its reputation for honesty. "While in the past settlements were an asset for Israel – some to be fixed assets, others to be negotiable assets – today settlement construction is



Prof. Efraim Inbar, Prof. Uzi Arad, and Maj. Gen. (res.) Yaakov Amidror.

intriguing possibility of using Israel's improving ties with sub-

Saharan Africa as a way of connecting with the Afro-American community.

The conference was capped by a detailed and revealing presentation by Mr. David Makovsky of Washington Institute of Near East Policy, who was part of US Secretary of State John Kerry's negotiating team for the failed Israeli-Palestinian talks. Makovsky argued that "history will yet record Kerry as Israel's best friend. It will show how closely he worked with Netanyahu to Israel's benefit."

Makovsky said that there was far more progress made in the talks than is known to the public, especially with regards to future borders and refugees. Israel, he said, made significant concessions on the former issue, and the Palestinians on the later. He admitted that no significant progress

was made on the issues of Jerusalem, security and mutual recognition.

Makovsky bemoaned the fact that the negotiations were conducted in a "hermetically sealed negotiation environment," with no "synchronized political messaging to the Israeli and Palestinian publics," and thus no way to prepare these publics for the compromises necessary for peace.

Makovsky admitted that the Palestinian unilateral appeal to the International Criminal Court and other UN institutions blew the talks apart, and that Israeli construction in the settlements during the talks was mostly limited to lands that Mahmoud Abbas had already agreed (in his talks with Prime Minister Olmert) to forgo. "Nevertheless, the atmospherics of the settlement issue were unhelpful," he said.

Makovsky warned of "overshooting the parties' red lines" by a US-backed UN resolution that might seek to set out definitive parameters for the two-state solution. Instead, he argued for a return to an incremental approach where strategic convergences and interests can be leveraged towards a more stable reality.

Also speaking at the conference were former Israeli ambassador to the US Danny Ayalon, Dr. Amnon Cavari of the Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya, Avinoam Bar-Yosef of the Jewish People Policy Institute, Dr. Faydra Shapiro of the Jezreel Valley College, and BESA Center associates Maj. Gen. (res.) Yaacov Amidror, Prof. Eytan Gilboa, Prof. Efraim Inbar and Prof. Shmuel Sandler.

increasingly seen as a liability." Meridor went on to express deep concern for the breakdown of "shared values" in American politics, and explained how this made it difficult for Israel to base its relationship with the US on shared values.

Prof. Walter Russell Mead of Bard College also related to the polarization of American politics, but stressed that the troubles in US-Israel relations run deeper. "They stem from a US desire to disengage globally. Obama is more a symptom than a cause of this," he argued. The cold, hard realism about the world that was central to Jacksonian thinking, has ebbed, he said, and American dependence on Mideast oil is at an all-time low. Mead stressed that Israel needs to find new ways to work with American liberals, and separately, with conservatives. He raised the



Prof. Walter Russell Mead.



Mr. David Makovsky.



Ambassador Danny Ayalon.