

U.S. Weapons Enforce British Mandate

by Carl Osgood

April 14—Anyone who examines the issue honestly is forced to come to the conclusion that the system of crushing occupation that Israel has imposed on the Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank could not exist, except for the huge supply of weapons and munitions that the U.S. provides on a yearly basis. That fact, however, is rarely discussed in Washington, especially in the Executive branch and Congress. On April 7, the Council for the National Interest (CNI)¹ made an effort to bring that topic directly to Capitol Hill, with a seminar on the impact of U.S. military aid to the Middle East. The forum demonstrated that, not only is U.S. military aid to Israel treated as a political entitlement, but it enables the war crimes that Israel has committed against the Palestinians, such as during last Winter's brutal assault on Gaza.

CNI president Eugene Bird opened up the event with an insider's account of a discussion a CNI delegation had with former Israeli Deputy Defense Minister Ephraim Sneh last November, during a tour of the region. Bird reported that Sneh told the delegation that Israel would be going into Gaza, but that "the only problem is that we don't have an exit strategy." Bird said he had asked Sneh if Israel would be willing to sign a new nuclear non-proliferation treaty, in view of the fact that then-President-elect Barack Obama had indicated his support for such a treaty. According to Bird, Sneh said, "No one should talk to us about reducing or eliminating our nuclear stockpile, and if anyone does, we will show them the door." (Of course, officially, the Israeli government has never admitted to having nuclear weapons.)

1. CNI describes itself as a "non-partisan grassroots organization advocating a new direction for U.S. Middle East policy that will better serve the interests of the American people." Among its members are retired foreign service officers and activists who advocate an even-handed policy towards the region.

The Problem in Congress

That Capitol Hill is largely to blame for the current one-sided policy toward the Middle East, was amply exposed by former Rep. Wayne Gilchrest (R-Md.), who was himself driven out of Congress in 2008, because he had openly pursued an even-handed policy with respect to the region. During the 110th Congress, Gilchrest was the heart and soul of the "Dialogue Caucus," a small grouping of members from both sides of the aisle, who countered the perpetual war doctrine of the Bush-Cheney regime by working for a dialogue with certain countries that the Administration was targetting, particularly Iran. Gilchrest gave an account of exactly how the pressure from the pro-Israel lobby, that is to say, AIPAC (American Israel Political Affairs Committee), works to prevent a serious debate on U.S. policy towards the Middle East.

In his keynote remarks, Gilchrest emphasized the importance of understanding history before making decisions: "If you know nothing about history," he said, "decision making can be very thin." He noted that members of Congress are under so much pressure to address such a wide range of issues, that they have very little time to become really competent at anything, a problem which especially impacts the development of policy on the Middle East. In those circumstances, he said, members of Congress "follow the path of least resistance," to pursue their political careers. As a result, he added, "Our view of the Middle East has been shaded by almost a complete lack of knowledge of the history of the region, especially since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire."

Gilchrest then reviewed Congressional efforts to bring about a more balanced approach to the region. He and others, on a number of occasions, proposed amendments to appropriations bills, which would have prohibited the Bush Administration from launching military incursions into Iran, without Congressional approval. On at least one of those occasions, in early 2007, an amendment made it through the House Rules Committee, but was pulled, without explanation, before it reached the floor. Gilchrest didn't say so, but there was only one person who could have done that: the Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.). Pelosi had actually expressed support for such a measure early in the session, until she made a pilgrimage to address the annual AIPAC conference, where she expounded on the alleged Iranian threat to Israel's security, and how it was necessary to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear

weapons. After that, all talk of putting restraints on the Bush Administration's ability to wage unprovoked war on Iran ceased, and Gilchrest's amendment disappeared.

Gilchrest also noted an effort that he and Rep. Gregory Meeks (D-N.Y.) had made, in which they circulated a letter among their colleagues calling for a dialogue with the Iranian parliament. Many members refused to sign the letter, saying, "I can't do that because I would be crushed like a walnut." He further noted that amendments recommending dialogue with Iran, or calling for the U.S. to send an ambassador to Syria, were very difficult to get through. It's possible to do such things, Gilchrest said, "but there's a hold on the U.S. Congress by groups trying to persuade Americans that there's only one U.S. ally in the Middle East—Israel."

No Basis for U.S. Arms to Israel

The theme of the forum, for which Gilchrest provided the political context, was the impact of U.S. military aid in the Middle East, primarily with respect to Israel. Gilchrest was followed to the podium by Col. Harry Shaw (ret.) who, over a long career as both a military officer and a civilian official, has had experience with military aid programs dating back to the mid-1960s. Shaw recounted how Townsend Hoopes, a deputy assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs, led a review of military aid programs in 1965, that determined that such assistance had to meet three criteria: there should be a good military objective for supporting the country; there should be a good economic reason; and it should be in the interests of our country to provide such aid. "If you don't have answers for all three questions," he said, "you shouldn't be giving the aid."

Shaw documented how that review led to an inter-agency process by which all military aid programs, including for Israel, were evaluated; but that process essentially came to an end by the time Ronald Reagan became President in 1981. As a result, American military aid to Israel grew from about \$1 billion at that time, to \$3 billion today, without any analytical basis whatsoever, and yet, the George W. Bush Administration, just before it left office, promised another \$30 billion in aid to Israel over the next ten years, for purely political reasons. The lesson of the 1965 review, Shaw said, was, "If you don't stop and take a really hard look at the rationale for this kind of thing, it becomes expensive, it becomes an entitlement, and it be-

comes something that you can't touch."

The overall conclusion of the forum, was that the totality of the military aid to Israel is neither in the interests of the United States, nor of Israel. Israeli peace activist Uri Avnery, in a videotaped message played for the forum, argued that neither Israel's wars against its neighbors, nor the U.S. "war on terror" is in the interest of either country. Instead, he said, "the U.S. has an interest in solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in a way that disarms the hatred and animosity of Arabs towards Israel." Avnery urged the U.S. to exert pressure on all sides to reach such a peace agreement. U.S. arms should only be delivered to Israel on the condition that Israel works for peace by means of serious negotiations, on the basis laid out by President Clinton in the late 1990s; that is, Israeli withdrawal back to the 1967 borders, the establishment of a viable Palestinian state, and a reasonable solution to the refugee problem. "American arms to Israel," Avnery concluded, "should be conditioned on steady progress towards such a solution."

By most measures, the Obama Administration appears to have charted out a different course with respect to diplomacy in the Middle East than that of the previous administration. But, in the crucial matter of U.S. military aid to Israel, that does not appear to be the case. On April 2, Amnesty International reported that a massive shipment of U.S. munitions, totalling 989 containers, was delivered to the Israeli port of Ashdod on March 22. A Pentagon spokesman confirmed the shipment, but said that it was to replenish U.S. pre-positioned stocks in Israel, although Israel reportedly has access to these stocks. The delivery went ahead, despite Amnesty's documentation of Israeli war crimes in Gaza to the State Department, only weeks before. As of the time of the CNI forum, State still had the matter of Israeli mis-use of U.S.-supplied weapons "under review."

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