

Israel at War: Charting the Contours of a Developing Crisis

Week 3: American Support for a City on a Hill

January 24, 2024

In the early words of his Sermon on the Mount, just after what is recorded as “The Beatitudes,” Jesus begins teaching about the public witness of his disciples. He uses metaphors like *salt* and *light* noting the impact their lives will make on those with whom they are the closest. And then he makes this statement, “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden.” (Matt. 5:14) It’s another metaphor, the life of the fully devoted follower of Jesus shines brightly in a dark world (cf., Phil. 2:15). Yet in another sense, as these twelve *Jewish* disciples represent both their home city of Jerusalem (cf. Psalm 2:6) on one hand, and the new Israel on the other, Jerusalem is a light to the nations. As Isaiah spoke, “I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.” (Isaiah 49:6) Israel, with Jerusalem as its “city on a hill” continues to shine brightly for all the world to see.¹

For the last 76 years, the world has been watching—and many have been supporting—this city, this nation, this people.² The United States has led that effort in its protection and funding of Israel nearly without question. In fact, the US has given Israel more aid than any other nation since World War II (\$260B). The US support has remained consistent and bipartisan, as President Joe Biden said a few months ago, “The connection between the Israeli people and the American people is bone deep.... We’ve reaffirmed the unshakable commitment of the United States to Israel’s security, including partnering with Israel on the most cutting-edge defense systems in the world.... We’re united in our shared values and are our shared vision.”³

What is “Settler Colonialism”?

Some have said the state of Israel is the product of a merger between “a land without a people” and “a people without a land.” Yet others have been more critical, explaining Israel to be the consequence of a “settler colonialist” ideology—a form of colonialism in which the existing inhabitants of a territory are displaced by settlers who claim land and establish a permanent society where their privileged status is enshrined in law.⁴ Such a perspective brings Israel’s establishment and its flourishing closer to an American conversation than some may think.

¹ One must go “up” to Jerusalem, not down. (cf., John 5:1) Though Mount Zion stands at a modest 2,510 ft (just outside the city walls) Jerusalem is a “city on a hill.” (cf., Psalm 48:2)

² What can perhaps best be described as a mixed demonstration of Western support and Zionist idealism, the US Embassy was moved from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem on May 14, 2018, the 70th anniversary of Israel being established as an independent nation state. In 1995, the US Congress formerly adopted the Jerusalem Embassy Act, urging the federal government to relocate the embassy to Jerusalem, thus recognizing the city as Israel’s capitol.

³ A sample of famous quotes from American Presidents since 1948. Eisenhower: “We are [both] imbued with a religious faith and a sense of moral values.” Kennedy: “We will never turn our backs on our steadfast friends in Israel.” H.W. Bush: “Our alliance... is built upon the foundation of shared democratic values, of shared history and heritage that sustaining the moral life of our two countries... it transcends politics.” Clinton: “Like America, Israel is a strong democracy, as a symbol of freedom, and oasis of liberty, a home to the oppressed in persecuted.” Bush (43): “We are both countries established with certain basic beliefs: that God watches over the affairs of men and values every human life.” Obama: “The Jewish people have forged a successful state in the historic homeland. Israel deserves recognition.” Donald Trump: “The Land of Israel is an ancient home, a sacred place of worship, and a solemn promise to the Jewish people that we will never again repeat history’s darkest hour.”

⁴ Jennifer Schuessler, “What Is ‘Settler Colonialism’?” *The New York Times*. January 22, 2024.

Though Americans do not have the biblical history of Israel, some have seen a shared idealism with both states (to include Australia and Canada, as well) as products of settler colonialism.⁵ In one sense, in the American eye, Israel is a mirror of American idealism.

Leading Reasons Why the United States is Pro-Israel

With such unwavering support, we must ask (much more as American citizens), why has the United States remained unwaveringly consistent in their support of the nation state of Israel?

1. Original Support

As an allied victor in World War II, expressing great sympathy for the holocaust, the United States has supported Israel since its inception in 1948. President Harry Truman (who was facing re-election at the time) became the first world leader to recognize the Jewish state. Only eleven minutes after its creation, he called Israel “an embodiment of great ideals of civilization.”

2. Shared Values

The US and Israel share common values for a flourishing society. Both countries value freedom of speech and equality under the law. Further, they share similar forms of govern allowing for a democratic discourse while located in two very different parts of the globe. United States Presidents have generally maintained a healthy relationship with Prime Ministers of Israel.⁶

3. Strategic Interests

To a large degree, the United States has brokered a sensitive relationship between Israel and their middle eastern neighbors. More importantly, maintaining a healthy relationship with Israel affords the US a rationale to be in the region among mutual enemies. The US gives 3.8 billion dollars to Israel every year for military defense.

4. Christian Zionism (as distinct from Jewish Zionism)

Many evangelical Christians of a hard lined dispensational perspective believe the formation of a Jewish state is a fulfillment of biblical prophecy, and further that the Jews must return to their homeland to bring about the return of Jesus. As a result, evangelical support for Israel changes the voting blocks and the posture of the White House. Politicians are not willing to risk their constituency base by not supporting Israel, not to mention the vast wealth of the Israeli people.

Discussion Questions:

1. What factors could influence the global south’s view the western support for Israel?
2. How has Christian Zionism remained a factor among a secularizing American society? What ideas have perhaps led to the ‘Americanization’ of Israel in the American mind?
3. What would it take for the United States to turn its back on Israel? In what sense may the United States see Israel as “the enemy of my enemy is my friend”?

⁵ In her book *Our American Israel: The Story of an Entangled Alliance*, (Harvard University Press, 2018), the late Amy Kaplan argues that American support for Israel is rooted in the idea of settler societies. But some may push back by pointing to the American experiment as fundamentally different than a Jewish return to a homeland.

⁶ Prime Ministers of Israel since 1948: David Ben-Gurion, 1948-53, 1955-63; Moshe Sharett; 1953-55; Levi Eshkol, 1963-69; Golda Meir, 1969-74; Yitzhak Rabin, 1974-77, 1992-95; Menachem Begin, 1977-83; Yitzhak Shamir (1st time), 1983-84, 1986-92; Shimon Peres, 1984-86, 1995-96; Benjamin Netanyahu, 1996-99, 2009-2021, 2022-present; Ehud Barak, 1999-2001; Ariel Sharon, 2001-06; Ehud Olmert, 2006-09; Naftali Bennett, 2021-22; Yair Lapid, 2022.