COMMENTARY | POLITICS

A Reset for U.S. Policy? Not Now, But Watch the Base

By: Rashid Khalidi · December, 2011

Al-Shabaka Policy Advisor ***Rashid Khalidi*** *assesses the position of the United States towards Palestine-Israel in the wake of the Palestinian bid for membership of the United Nations. Khalidi, Edward Said Professor of Modern Arab Studies at Columbia University and director of the Middle East Institute of Columbia's School of International and Public Affairs, is also the Editor of the* Journal of Palestine Studies.

In this wide-ranging interview with Al-Shabaka Program Director Victor Kattan, Khalidi has some harsh words for President Barack Obama, describing his UN speech in September as the worst ever by an American president. Khalidi also reviews the way in which U.S. policy toward the conflict was transformed over decades, including through the efforts of Dennis Ross, and discusses why AIPAC (the American Israel Public Affairs Committee) is far more effective today than it was in the 1970s and 1980s. Although he sees no hope at present for a just U.S. policy, this could change if public opinion – which is much more enlightened than that of U.S. policy makers – is expressed through the media and at the political level.

Victor Kattan: What did you think about the Palestinian strategy to become a member state of the United Nations? Some Palestinians think that it was a mistake to have gone straight to the Security Council.

Rashid Khalidi: I would argue that it depends on what objective you are trying to

achieve. If your objective is a narrow diplomatic one to obtain maximum benefits at minimum costs, which is a perfectly rational approach, it might have been advisable to have avoided the Security Council and to have gone directly to the General Assembly. If, however, this was part of what I would call a declaration of independence from the United States, and the idea was to illustrate the fact that the United States is an obstacle to a just resolution of the conflict, then I don't see why a defeat in the Security Council, by a U.S. veto or a lack of necessary votes, doesn't serve that purpose and then that could be followed by going to the General Assembly and achieving the same objective. Obviously you don't want to suffer a defeat if you don't have to and another argument would be why should the Palestinians accentuate their differences with the U.S..

VK: What did you think of Abu Mazen's speech before the UN General Assembly?

RK: I thought that it was an unexpectedly good speech. I think that a not fully appreciated result of the whole initiative was the re-opening of questions that have been ignored – especially in the U.S.

It generated an enormous amount of interest in the Palestine question, and I don't think the PA/PLO capitalized on it at all, as much as they should have, and might have, and ought to have. But, nonetheless the media frenzy around the UN effort opened up issues having to do with the role of the U.S., having to do with the moribund so-called peace process, having to do with going back to the UN and international resolutions as a basis of a resolution, having to do with the anomaly between Israel getting sanctioned as a state in 1947 by UN General Assembly resolution [GA 181, the November 29, UN partition plan] and the Palestinian state being disallowed. All these things have been opened up and I think the whole discussion has moved on a little bit.

Now obviously it requires capitalizing on that. One of my constant regrets is that there has never been a serious Palestinian official effort to effectively make the

case. Every time a Palestinian delegation comes to New York, if they spent a tenth of the time they spend in the UN delegates' lounge on American television, on American campuses, and talking to people they would be doing the cause a great deal of good.

VK: What did you think about the position adopted by some Palestinians and Palestinian organizations, including many in the U.S., who opposed the Palestinian strategy to go to the UN because of the question of refugee rights among other issues?

RK: I think those were unwarranted fears. I cannot see how the continuation of a strategy at the UN, in which the PLO has been engaged for a very long time, would necessarily jeopardize the status of the refugees. I think you can argue that the two-state solution is problematic among other things because it does not fully take into account the refugee issue. But that is a problem some people have been talking about since 1974 when it was first floated by the PLO. That is a fundamental problem of the two-state solution. How is that made compatible with a just resolution of the Palestine refugee issue along the lines of GA resolution 194? I don't think that is something raised by going to the UN in September 2011, that's raised by a strategy that has been adopted since 1974. And that's a legitimate concern. I just did an interview with Ha'aretz and the journalist said what do you have against the two-state solution and I said one of the problems with the two-state solution is that it does not address the refugee issue. It does not address the issue of Palestinians inside Israel and it does not address the refugee issue. Those both have to be addressed.

VK: What did you make of President Barack Obama's address to the UN?

RK: In my memory it is one of the worst, if not the worst, speech an American President has ever given to the UN on the Palestine issue.

VK: I won't quote it to you then because I have got the speech right in front of

me…

RK: Well you can quote it if you want. It was a repudiation of long-held American positions and an adoption of the Israeli position that the U.S. has in the past been unwilling to adopt. In the past there have been campaign speeches and statements by Presidents running for re-election or candidates for the Presidency, or pandering to AIPAC or to other similar lobbying organizations by Presidential candidates, or speeches by Presidents that I can remember that have been pretty awful, including some by this President. But I cannot recall a speech to the UN General Assembly by an American President that quite plumbed these depths.

VK: Why do you think he gave such a pro-Israel speech?

RK: Well I don't know the specifics, but anyone who understands the making of American foreign policy and its interaction with the domestic scene will understand that really you had two Obama Presidencies. You had the one before November 2010 when the Democrats lost control of the House and the one after November 2010—and we are still in that period. Actually in the first couple of years the Administration had the illusion that it had all the time in the world to do whatever it pleased and it launched a number of initiatives: the Istanbul speech, the Cairo speech, the demand for a settlement freeze and so on and so forth, essentially wasting an enormous amount of time in a situation where it thought it was politically invulnerable. What happened in November 2010 is that the Administration discovered that they were extremely politically vulnerable—and the Republicans wasted no time in beating them about the head with the Palestine-Israel issue. The Administration has never recovered. They are still cowering in the corner on this issue. Frankly, Netanyahu has more support in Washington than the President does. He knows it, and they know it.

VK: Do you think anything would change if Obama won a second term?

RK: I have no idea. I would argue that unless the underlying structure in terms of

American politics regarding this issue changes then you are not going to see any administration do anything different. I mean the days when an American President would impose a freeze on loan guarantees to Israel or call for a reassessment of American policy or of aid towards Israel, or otherwise alienate the Israelis—I am talking about Nixon, Ford, Carter, Bush senior—those days have passed. We have today a very different political environment in the U.S. Unless and until that changes I honestly don't see a change. Frankly there has been enormous continuity between this President and the previous President. Just yesterday in New York the President reassured Jewish supporters that his Administration is committed to Israel and would not compromise…

VK: What do you think brought about the change in policy after Bush senior?

RK: Even Clinton. Even Clinton. You could see Clinton resisting Netanyahu on certain issues in such a fashion that I think it even contributed to Netanyahu's defeat in 1999.

VK: So what brought this change about in the last 10 or 15 years?

RK: I don't know the precise factors though I would say one thing. The Lobby has become even more effective. It was not what it was cracked up to be in the 70s and 80s, it really wasn't. It was a culmination of circumstances which included the fact that the Cold War tracked with the Arab-Israeli conflict really from the 1960s through the end of the 1980s. Nobody was fully aware of the fact that a lot of the support for Israel had to do with support for a U.S. client acting against Soviet clients rather than specific support for Israel qua Israel. In the interim the lobby has developed enormous power and it has developed another leg which is the Christian-Evangelical leg. So really I would argue that, in terms of the formidable political machine operating on Capitol Hill, this is different, it isn't your father's AIPAC as it were. It's not dependent on districts with large numbers of Jewish voters, or dependent upon congressmen or congresswomen or senators or

whatever, who need this kind of political, or financial or campaign support. It's grounded both in that and I would argue at least as importantly in the evangelical Christian base, certainly in the Republican party many of whose voters are deeply committed to a right-wing Evangelical interpretation of Israel, which, you know, is perfectly in tune with the Likud party's outlook. So those are new factors, none of which existed in the 70s and 80s. Then it was the Cold War.

VK: Would you say that American society, or some parts of American society, has become more, I don't know if the right word is religious?

RK: Religion has become more openly injected into politics. American society has always been religious. It is just that the Evangelicals have become more politically active, and they have been mobilized by the Israeli lobby. It concerns attitudes and outlooks they already had which are in consonance with the outlook of, in particular, the rightwing of the Israeli lobby, the Ghengis-Khan wing, if you want, of the lobby, folks like the Zionist Organization of America who are really to the right of Likud.

VK: To what extent can Congress tie the hands of the President when it comes to issues like relations with Israel?

RK: Well it depends on how much political capital the President is able and willing to spend and how much the President wants to compete with Congress in terms of making a case to public opinion.

Constitutionally, Congress has the power of the purse, over things like appropriations, and spending: all spending Bills have to originate in the House. The Senate has other powers with treaties and appointments and so on. But that means that its constitutional prerogatives give Congress a certain influence – but we are not really necessarily talking about that. It can pass laws such as the law that in effect has defunded UNESCO, which is an old law by the way, passed way back before anyone thought this was an important issue. But it is mainly in the

contest for discursive or rhetorical supremacy that the President has to worry about Congress. I mean if Congress is, you know, up on its hind legs demanding to move the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem, or saying it is in favor of settlements, or that whatever Israel does should be the bottom line of American policy, then it is very difficult for the President to make a case otherwise unless he or she is willing to sacrifice political capital in order to go toe to toe and argue the case out before the American people. There are very few American Presidents who have been willing to do that. Bush senior was, by the way. A couple of Presidents have been in the past. That's now a much more difficult endeavor.

VK: You recently wrote a piece in The Hill's Congress Blog on Dennis Ross's role in formulating U.S. foreign policy towards Israel and the Palestinians. Could you elaborate on that?

RK: Dennis Ross has played a role since the Reagan Administration when he was in the Defense department. He was dealing with the Middle East but mainly regarding Gulf issues. But ever since then and with increasing influence up through the Clinton and Obama Administrations (the only administration he did not serve with was the George W. Bush administration) he has played a major role in the shaping of American policy [towards Israel and the Palestinians]. That role has included helping to influence American policy makers to accept an Israeli ceiling on what American policy can be, such that Begin's vision of autonomy at Camp David over time becomes what America sees as the only realizable outcome for the Palestinians. That is essentially the Oslo formula. That is essentially the interim self-governing authority that Begin put forward in 1978. And Ross played a big role in convincing policymakers that further than this the U.S. cannot go in terms of the Palestinians.

He tried to convince policymakers that Israel would never talk to the PLO and never accept the PLO as a full partner. He was very surprised when Rabin and Arafat went behind the backs of the U.S. and reached the understanding that

formed the basis of the Oslo Accords. He had been telling his political bosses that this was very unlikely. So, you know, he has helped to lower the ceiling of American policy essentially to where it is almost consonant with Israeli policy. He has been helped by other people like Martin Indyk who started as a lobbyist for Israel at AIPAC. And both of them have worked at an institution in Washington—the Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP) that was established by the Israel lobby.

It is a remarkable shift from the days when people who were not in the least sympathetic to Israel and in many cases had experience in the Arab world dominated policymaking and the intelligence community and the Pentagon to a situation today where people who are extremely comfortable with American policy being completely in conformity with the policy of Israel hold almost all the important positions in American administrations. And I think Dennis Ross is emblematic of that shift. He himself also had a lot of influence. I would say that obviously this is not to the good. What did these ideas of an interim period, of an interim self-governing authority, of deferring final status issues, of limiting Palestinian representation as Israel wished it to be limited, what did it bring us? It brought us 20 years in which we end up much further away from any kind of resolution of this conflict and with hundreds of thousands more settlers in the occupied territories than we had back in 1990 – 1991.

VK: Would it be right to say that you are pessimistic about U.S. policy changing?

RK: Yes I see little likelihood of a very big change in the immediate future. Obviously, it depends very much on the results of the elections, and it depends very much on how much the political level is influenced by public opinion. Public opinion in the U.S. is actually more evolved than the media or the political discourse would lead one to believe. It depends on that being harnessed and expressed via the media and at the political level, and as long as it is not, which is the case right now, I would continue to be pessimistic. I mean look at polling of

American opinion, of American Jewish opinion. It is far to the left of where the lobby is or where Congress is, or where the policy of this administration and the last administration were. In spite of all of the built in sympathy for Israel, all of the hostility to Muslims and Middle Easterners, and Arabs, and Palestinians in particular, and all the rhetoric around terrorism, in spite of all of that, the actual polling shows you consistently over time that people have a much more enlightened understanding of this conflict than the stuff that is in the media and in the political discourse would lead you to believe.

VK: What impact do you think the so-called Arab Spring or Arab Winter, the conflict in Syria, Libya, and the victory of the Brotherhood in elections in Egypt and Tunisia …

RK: Morocco as well where you also had an election and the Islamists won.

VK: True. So what impact might this have in terms of the situation between Israelis and Palestinians and also as regards U.S. policy towards Israel and the region?

RK: Well if what some Israelis and Americans want happens this will be used as a bogeyman to scare people to bring Israel and the U.S. closer together—if that's possible. One can see that already happening. People are already trying to do that. In the real world one thing that will probably happen as a result of these elections is that all governments in the Arab world will have to pay more attention to public opinion in the formation of foreign policy than they have traditionally. Most Arab governments, which are authoritarian, have paid very little attention to what their people said. They have paid lip service to it. But in practice they did not put their money where their mouth was. They did not do what they said they were going to do or anything that was consonant with what they were saying. I think that might change. I think that any kind of democratization process, which is only at its very beginning in the Arab world—over time—will probably have that effect.

And obviously that will have a direct impact upon Israel because people in the

Arab world are sympathetic towards the Palestinians, however unsympathetic many of their governments have been and however concerned they are about many other issues. It is a fairly consistent factor right across the Arab world that there is a deep sympathy for the Palestinians and a concern with how they have been treated by Israel, and there is some knowledge of what the situation is in occupied Palestine. The greater impact of public opinion on government would presumably reflect that sympathy and concern.

VK: Do you think this could in turn have an impact on how the U.S. deals with the Palestinians?

RK: I see little sign of it affecting the U.S. frankly. The U.S. does not pay much attention to Arab public opinion unfortunately in the formation of its foreign policy.

VK: Are you surprised by the way Israel has reacted…because it is obviously opposed to the changes happening in Egypt?

RK: Not entirely surprised. I mean I am saddened because this was probably an opportunity for Israel to re-imagine its relationship with the entire Arab world. An intelligent, generous, and open response from the Israelis, which would, among other things, involve examining Israel's past and examining its relationship with the Palestinians, and examining its support (along with the U.S. and Europe) for detestable authoritarian regimes, would be the beginning of a new relationship…

You can read intelligent Israeli commentators saying that this is actually an opportunity, we should not be afraid of it. But the majority of the response from the politicians and many other commentators is my God what are we going to do, Mubarak is gone, we loved Mubarak, what do we do without Mubarak, authoritarian regimes are our last best hope. You know they are now mourning the Assad regime, even before it has gone. They loved to hate it when he was there, but they can't stand the idea of living without it.

VK: Are you aware of the draft of domestic legislation that's currently going through the Knesset, legislation like the loyalty oaths and restricting foreign funding to human rights organizations in Israel which is actually leading heads of U.S. organizations like Abraham Foxman of the Anti Defamation League to say that if these Bills pass Israel will become less democratic. Do you not think that if Israel does pass more authoritarian legislation that it will lose support in America?

RK: Well I don't think it will matter on the political level in the short run because people in Congress are sublimely ignorant of the realities of what is going on. They live in a state of suspended animation as far as the actualities of what happens in Israel and Palestine are concerned. But I think that among an important segment of American public opinion—younger people and people who are more knowledgeable—there is a degree of horror, including among people who are more supportive of Israel, at this turn in Israeli domestic discourse towards a more authoritarian, nationalist, chauvinist, religious, overtly racist foundation for the polity. It is not just talk. It is an attempt to reframe citizenship, and belonging, and constitutional norms, and so forth, in a much more chauvinistic authoritarian way. Obviously anyone, especially those who are more sympathetic to Israel, and who know about this are horrified.

VK: It also makes it harder for them to make their case.

RK: Well it's not only a matter of them making their case. It is a matter of how unsympathetic they find this kind of attitude. They are increasingly having to deal in Israel with people who are unreconstructed racists, people who they themselves would not welcome here in the U.S.. It is an outlook that is very hard to square with the largely liberal outlook of most younger, more educated members of the Jewish community.

VK: Have you noticed that when you or others give lectures in the U.S., whether there is more of a hostile reaction to people who take the Israeli position?

RK: It is harder and harder to make the case for Israel besides preaching to the converted it seems, especially the case of the Israeli government and a hard line Israeli position. This is in spite of enormous efforts to beautify Israel's image, despite enormous efforts in terms of public diplomacy, and hasbara [Israeli propaganda], and spin, and public relations, and image management, and huge sums of money, innumerable organizations, and speakers by the plane-load coming over here. It is very obvious that on a lot of campuses it is very hard for them to get a sympathetic reception. Are they doing any more than preaching to a narrow choir of the converted? This is not the case with people speaking more objectively or taking a pro-Palestinian position. Those people seem to have wider and wider audiences. Some people may be skeptical, they may be sympathetic or unsympathetic, but they are getting listened to. There is a debate that is open now that just wasn't open when I was an undergraduate or when I first started teaching in the States in the 1980s.

VK: Have you noticed a change in your students over the last two decades?

RK: I have noticed generally when I have given lectures publicly or in my own classes that attitudes have certainly evolved over time. Students are more knowledgeable, and because they are more knowledgeable they are a lot less bigoted. The old positions of blind support for Israel were largely rooted in ignorance. You have a much more nuanced understanding even among people who are supportive of Israel. The audiences are better informed. I get lots more smart questions. I get less stupid questions taken out of a book distributed by pro-Israel organizations. Two decades ago you got a lot more of that, you get much less of it today.

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