COMMENTARY | POLITICS

The US Elections, Attacks on Activists, and a Changing Discourse

By: Rashid Khalidi · April, 2016

Introduction

In his 2013 book *Brokers of Deceit*: *How the U.S. Has Undermined Peace in the Middle East*, Al-Shabaka Policy Advisor Rashid Khalidi identified three main patterns that have characterized United States policy towards the conflict since 1948: The complaisance of Arab rulers that need US support against their own peoples; presidential solicitude for domestic constituencies; and US unconcern about the fate of the Palestinians.[1]

During a wide-ranging conversation, Al-Shabaka Executive Director Nadia Hijab discussed with Khalidi the extent to which the current moment in the US might challenge – or reinforce – the "underlying continuities" that he identified in his book. The discussion covered the fierce attacks on activists engaged in promoting boycotts, sanctions and divestment (BDS) in the US; the changing discourse and whether this can impact policy; the Obama Administration; and the toxic environment created by US relations with the Arab Gulf states as well as the new, very dangerous overt alliance between the Gulf and Israel.

On the Shift in the Discourse

There is indeed an ongoing shift in discourse. It is partly generational and partly due to the move to new and alternative and social media. It is this shift that explains why you can now have BDS campaigns and a candidate like Bernie Sanders who can say the kinds of things he said in his Idaho speech – the speech he didn't deliver at AIPAC – like talking about Israel controlling 80% of the water reserves in the West Bank, which injects a little bit of reality into the discourse. Sanders' core supporters are largely younger, more liberal people who are reflective of a growing part of the base of the Democratic Party.

There is a mendacious construct focusing on Palestinian "terrorism" and Israeli "security" that is used to describe the situation in the Middle East, which most politicians mechanically repeat. The fact that people like Sanders or Senator Patrick Leahy are publicly – and that others are privately – beginning to throw away that false script is a function of broader change.[2]

This is the moment we're in. BDS is a tactic that people can latch on to. People are not getting a lead from the political side: The Palestinian national movement is paralyzed, frozen, and sabotaged from within, and the Arab world is plagued with virulent sectarianism, and is dominated by corrupt, undemocratic regimes. Instead, the lead is coming from civil society, and its message appeals to a very diverse demographic that is deeply distrustful of the mainstream media. My students know that the mainstream media lies and they approach it with profound skepticism. It doesn't mean they all become wide-eyed Palestinian activists, but they don't follow the mainstream media, unlike people of an older generation.

So there is no question that there is discursive change. I visit college campuses all over the country and there is no comparison with the situation a dozen years ago. You can also see the activism in other arenas, for example liberal churches and synagogues, and some unions. In earlier decades, there was nothing other than the Zionist narrative; now there are several narratives – several Palestinian narratives and several different Zionist narratives. It is this free marketplace of ideas that the rightwing Zionists are trying to shut down.

The Attacks Against Activism

Every action has an equal and opposite reaction. In this case, the reaction to Palestine solidarity activism in the US has been much more than equal. It is massive, and it is manipulated and paid for by billionaires and by dozens of organizations that have multi-million dollar budgets, all of which are engaged in opposing student activism.

The virulence and scope of the reaction is an indication of how widespread the discursive change has been. Conservative politicians and the leaders of the American Jewish community (who are far to the right of much of the community they claim to represent) are getting hysterical about the challenge to the narrative they have successfully peddled for so long, and they are reacting quite ferociously.

It is an extraordinary pushback against a loose network of self-motivated young people doing what they think is right. There has been some chilling effect on free speech and academic freedom, and some limitation of people's willingness to stick their necks out. But there is pushback against the pushback, based on the quintessential American value of freedom of speech, and on academic freedom, and it has opened up the debate on Zionism and on anti-Semitism. These are issues about which the Zionist forces do not want an open debate. Most of their propositions are fundamentally false: They have flimsy arguments and cannot withstand a real open debate. They think they can get by with *hasbara* (propaganda), but you can't fool increasing numbers of students and young people with that type of thing, so the Zionist pushback has generated a debate that has opened up the false narrative. BDS is a tactic on campuses to open up the debate. It is not designed to change the balance of power in Congress: All this is directed at opening up the debate. People will then know they've been lied to constantly.

From Discourse to Politics to Policy

While some parts of US society are now more truth-based, nothing has changed in terms of the way in which US elites define this country's strategic interests in the Middle East, and therefore nothing has changed about the policy status quo.

Before you can translate the ongoing discourse shift into policy, you have to translate it into politics. What this or any other administration does will be affected by how they see material and strategic US interests and by domestic politics; I don't think the way these interests are seen has changed very much.

Most of what is happening on campuses and in churches and civil society has nothing to do with politics. You are not seeing dozens of representatives in the House of Representatives or state governors being elected because of their position on this issue. We are several steps away from a significant change in politics. There are straws in the wind that show what may or may or not be happening, such as Leahy and Sanders and other figures alive to the changes in the demography of the Democratic Party, and of the country more broadly. But absent a political change and a change in the way in which US interests are seen and understood, we won't see a change in policy. It could happen very quickly, but there is no sign of it now.

Sanders' positions on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are intended to appeal to his base. He is immune to some of the attacks or smears against other politicians because he is Jewish and has lived in Israel. His hiring of the young Jewish anti-occupation activist Simone Zimmerman as his national Jewish outreach coordinator was in tune with the

make-up of his base of supporters (Zimmerman has since been suspended because of comments on Facebook against Benjamin Netanyahu and Hillary Clinton).

The reality is that the established Jewish community leadership does not represent its supposed constituency. Older, richer, conservatives dominate the local federations and most community organizations, but many American Jews are not old, rich or conservative. Leading establishment members such as Haim Saban and Sheldon Adelson are to the right even of Netanyahu; a large number of American Jews do not have such right-wing views on Palestine/Israel. Sanders has proven that amongst younger groups there is enormous openness to thinking about things differently.

When it comes to translating politics into policy, the American dimension is not the only one. It would be very important for there to be a revived Palestinian national movement that is able to articulate Palestinian national aims in a convincing manner. This has not been the case for a long time. Palestinian or US civil society only represent themselves, and what they are able to do, important though it is, particularly in the present conjuncture, is quite different to having a vibrant Palestinian national movement that can articulate a clear strategy for liberation. When that develops, things will change. Of course, it involves making the right strategic choices: Palestinians have sometimes made the wrong strategic choices in the past.

Israeli and Republican Right Joined at the Hip

The fact that the Barack Obama administration has provided more support to Israel than previous administrations has not been sufficiently recognized largely because of the virulent, visceral dislike of him in Israel, which is partly motivated by the overt, unashamed racism characterizing Israeli political discourse. Israel used to be led by "good liberals" and intellectuals who, at least rhetorically, were not overtly racist. Now the inherent discriminatory nature of the state is no longer masked, as is evidenced by, for example, their treatment of Africans and their overtly racialized discourse. They cannot conceal their contempt for this man.

There is a junction of US and Israeli politics that is not yet widely appreciated. Many Israeli mainstream politicians, including much of the present government, are just an extension of the bigots that have taken over the Republican Party. Adelson is symptomatic of this: He is one of the biggest donors to the Republican right wing and to the Israeli right. The ruling Israeli right and the American right are now joined at the hip. There is a seamless connection between the bigots and racist demagogues who now dominate the Republican Party and the bigots and racists who dominate Israeli politics. They hate the president because they believe he's Muslim and that he's racially inferior.

The other reason they hate him is that, whatever the president has done by way of support to Israel, they know that he knows better, and this really irritates them. He showed it over Iran when he drove a stake through the heart of the "Iran is the greatest danger to world peace" zombie that Israel has been peddling for decades, back to the time of Yitzhak Rabin. So although Obama has been the most pro-Israeli politician yet

when it comes to Palestinian rights, he has given the Israelis and their US allies a big reason to hate him by unmasking the Iran con game and producing a strategically changed Middle East as a result.

Will the Obama administration issue parameters or sponsor a United Nations resolution regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict? There is a lot of talk but no hard information. I would worry if they did. We are now stuck with the Bill Clinton parameters though Israel never took them seriously. In any case, given the terrible state of Palestinian politics, of the Arab world and of Israeli politics, I'm not sure it would have an impact.

Shift in US-Arab Relations

This is a big topic, but briefly, one thing American policy makers and the business establishment began to realize was that the three major American regional allies – Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey – create big problems for US policy even though they are of course still seen as assets. To take just Saudi Arabia, for example, the US has sponsored and supported *takfiri* Wahhabi radicalism, which is the godfather of the most virulent strain of fundamentalism, through its support for Saudi Arabia, and this goes right back to King Faysal and the 1960s; it's an old American strategy.

Many people in Washington D.C. are beginning to realize that this may not be a good thing. However, their ability to do anything about it is limited because the most powerful US business interests cannot wean themselves from Gulf oil wealth. This includes the oil industry, the banking and the real estate sectors, the aviation and defense industries, and so on. So while policy makers are aware of the problems, some of the most powerful interests in the US economy are completely wedded to the status quo in the Gulf. All kinds of problems are caused by Saudi Arabia as well as Israel and Turkey: Iran looks very different in that light. The three are of course still closely tied to the US by alliances and significant strategic and material interests and, in the case of Israel, by the discursive legerdemain the Zionists have managed in the US.

The president and his administration are edging toward change without much decisiveness. It remains to be seen whether the next administration will see things in this light. In the meantime, the toxic environment spread by Saudi *takfirism* has helped to create Israeli-Gulf alliances. There is now an overt alliance between the Gulf autocracies and Israel symbolized by the Raytheon anti-missile defense deal in the United Arab Emirates, which is ostensibly being constructed by a US company, but is really managed by Israel. This is a military alliance in all but name. That's the kind of environment in which we're operating: the autocrats who rule over the Gulf and have dominated Arab politics for decades are in increasingly overt alliance with Israel.

The hegemony of Saudi Arabia and its position on Palestine is not new; it dates back to Ibn Sa'ud and Truman. But this very dangerous overt alliance with Israel is new. And this, of course, is very challenging for Palestinian national rights, not to speak of any kind of decent, democratic and equitable order in the Arab world.

1. Al-Shabaka publishes all its content in both English and Arabic (see Arabic text here.) To read this piece in French or Italian, please click here or here. Al-Shabaka is grateful for the efforts by human rights advocates to translate its pieces into French and Italian, but is not responsible for any change in meaning.
2. *US Senator Patrick Leahy co-signed a 17 February 2016 letter with 10 other members of Congress asking the State Department to investigate whether Israeli and Egyptian security forces had committed "gross violations of human rights" thus triggering the Leahy Law and impacting on U.S. military aid to the countries. The letter cited Amnesty International and other human rights organization reports of possible extrajudicial killing and torture of Palestinians.*

Al-Shabaka: The Palestinian Policy Network, is an independent, non-profit organization. Al-Shabaka convenes a multidisciplinary, global network of Palestinian analysts to produce critical policy analysis and collectively imagine a new policymaking paradigm for Palestine and Palestinians worldwide.

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