PODCAST

US Military Aid to Israel with Nadya Tannous

By: Al-Shabaka: The Palestinian Policy Network, Nadya Tannous · August, 2021

The transcript below has been lightly edited for brevity and clarity.

Nadya Tannous 0:00

Most lawmakers will never hold Israel's military actions to the same standard or rubric that they will continue to hold other countries in the region accountable to. So there's much less political will, I should say, to condition military aid, because they would never label Israeli colonial violence as a human rights violation.

Yara Hawari 0:28

This is Rethinking Palestine, a podcast from Al-Shabaka, the Palestinian Policy Network. We are a virtual think tank that aims to foster public debate on Palestinian human rights and self-determination. We draw upon the vast knowledge and experience of the Palestinian people, whether in Palestine or in exile, to put forward strong and diverse Palestinian policy voices. In this podcast, we will be bringing these voices to you so that you can listen to Palestinians sharing their analysis wherever you are in the world.

The US has long been a supporter and ally of Israel — not only diplomatically but also through military and financial means — since its establishment. Indeed, Israel is vital for the US's imperial and capitalist interests in the Middle East, and this relationship has played a key role in shaping the politics of the region ever since.

But it's also long been under scrutiny by progressives, human rights organizations, and those on the left. In particular, there has been a focus on military aid, and in more recent years this topic has been gaining momentum, especially within activist spaces in the US who are putting the question to the mainstream public: why should billions of taxpayer dollars go to a foreign state which is occupying and oppressing people? And this has also seeped into discussions within political institutions. And we're seeing more US politicians — not loads, but certainly more — question that military aid.

To discuss this and more, I'm joined by Nadya Tannous, who is a Palestinian organizer and Al-Shabaka's visiting US fellow and is working specifically on this topic for us. Nadya, thank you so much for joining me.

Nadya Tannous 2:14

Thanks for having me, Yara.

Yara Hawari 2:16

Nadya, can you start by contextualizing US military aid to Israel and giving us a bit of a historical background?

Nadya Tannous 2:25

So since Israel's establishment in the region in 1948, the US has largely shaped its relationship to the Middle East and North Africa region through maintaining security and leverage for Israel and its supporters.

So as we track the policy decisions of the new Biden administration, it is important to remember that the US has never wavered from upholding Israel's hegemony in the region. It's a pretty entry-level idea and fact, but it's an important one. The basics are important because it's really what underpins a lot of the decisions that the United States is making, the calculations that they're making in the region, and

also, of course, the legislation that's coming out in support of military aid.

Yara Hawari 3:08

Nadya, you have illuminated how the US has always maintained this kind of aid and it's really been bipartisan. Can you explain what it means when US policymakers across the board talk about Israel's Qualitative Military Edge, the QME?

Nadya Tannous 3:29

The QME, or Qualitative Military Edge, ensures Israel's military advantage in the region in both military technologies and weaponry, and it is specifically as the preferred partner of the United States in the region and clearly as a proxy state for US interests. So that's what it means at the basic level.

It's an agreement that's long-established in US practice. It's been enshrined in US legislation since 2008, but it's enforced through United States congressional discretion. And so that's important.

Something that I talk about in the brief is a bill that Representative Schneider out of Illinois proposed, which is HR 8494. He proposed it in the fall, around November of last year. And what's really important to know — the bill was titled "Guaranteeing Israel's Qualitative Military Edge." And what's important to note is that it was brought forward in the clamor of Zionist anxieties about the integrity of Israel's QME in light of the Deal of the Century, in light of the Abraham Accords, where you see the same US weapon sales that are given to Israel as a preferential partner every year are now being offered up to Arab client states too. And that would create, potentially at least on paper, the ability for them to access the same level of firepower as Israel.

So Schneider's bill calls into question the integrity of Israel's QME and says, "Wait a minute, isn't Israel the US's preferred partner in the region? Why are these Arab

states who are normalizing, now at least on paper, going to be guaranteed the same level of weaponry?"

I think, just to highlight how ridiculous Schneider's bill was — and I want to remind us that it was co-sponsored by 19 other representatives — the bill was not significant because it was, again, backing Israel's hegemony in the region. We know that this is a consistent facet of most US policy and most legislation that reaches the Senate. But it was significant because it proposed that Israel itself — not the US Congress — would hold the deciding power over US weapons deals across the entire Middle East and North Africa region.

And that's a big deal, because at its core it is removing the decision power for weapons sales from US Congress and putting them in the hands of the Israeli state. This is something, Yara, that I think is exceptional to Israel. I cannot think of any other nation where you would have a US representative willingly propose to sign over the United States' largest international money-making mechanism — of course, selling weapons and technologies of control — and putting them in the hands of a foreign nation.

I think this just exemplifies both the current and existential anxiety by Zionists and Israel supporters that any other country, but particularly Arab nations, would receive the same caliber of weapons as the Israeli state from their US supplier. I think that's because Israel and its supporters know that Israeli hegemony is reliant upon this international prioritization and US support — unparalleled military might.

And so I think essentially, Schneider and others were processing: everything is fine now between the UAE and Israel, Bahrain and Israel, Saudi Arabia and Israel. But if it weren't, and these Arab nations have the same weaponry as Israel itself, or they're armed with equal military weapons — what are the stakes?

So I think they're in this very funny kind of existential tussle. But it's really shocking

that this bill not only made it to Congress but also had 19 other signatories who are also US representatives.

Yara Hawari 8:00

Nadya, I wanted to ask you if you could talk to us a little bit more about how this kind of aid has become such a key factor in the regional dynamics — between Israel and Arab states and between the Arab states and Palestine.

Nadya Tannous 8:13

One of the main ways that the US maintains security for Israel is by brokering peace deals between Arab state governments and the Israeli government. And this directly pressures Arab nations to capitulate to Israeli needs through a variety of mechanisms. So rescinding US military aid is one threat. A benefit can be graduating Arab states to be preferred recipients of support from bodies such as the IMF or the World Bank. And finally, the US invokes advantageous international trade deals and either US arms trade, military support, etc.

So we can see this — the first two Arab countries that normalized with Israel were, of course, Egypt in 1979 and Jordan in 1994. And we know that Trump ushered in a new era of US-brokered normalization treaties under the banner of the Abraham Accords — which I might casually refer to as the Deal of the Century — which were signed by the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Sudan.

This all happened, it all took place, while Palestinians were weathering constant settler attacks, the bombing of besieged Gaza. It directly implicates Palestine because the Accords directly undercut Palestinian demands for self-determination and they normalize Israeli state violence.

In many ways, these countries in the Arab region signing on and entering this agreement between the United States and Israel served as a green light for Israel to continue its ethnic cleansing campaign with impunity, as it has.

And so I think it's important also to contrast the Arab normalization and the military aid to Israel with Israeli policies on the ground which are happening concurrently — like the Jerusalem 2020 plan, the master plan, which aimed to expel the remaining Palestinian population from Jerusalem altogether.

And I can certainly talk more about the implications and the specifics of some of these offers from the United States through the Deal of the Century, etc. But I think, just to finish up this thought — today, Egypt is the second-largest recipient of US military aid after Israel, and Jordan benefits from one of the strongest currencies in the world, which is the Jordanian dinar. These are both benefits that are reaped by these Arab nations because of their initial normalization treaties with Israel.

So for the UAE and Bahrain, for example, they will be the recipients of a first-rate arms deal. And that's really where this brief comes in — to analyze the aftermath of this wave of normalization treaties on Palestine and the Arab nations who are beneficiaries of the agreement, and to analyze and support the pushback against them.

I know you asked about Israeli military aid and history. I think what we're seeing explicitly yet again are Arab nations buying into that routine US package to Israel by signing up for their own and saying, okay, we're going to now publicly toss aside the Palestinian cause — whether or not they were doing so implicitly, right, previously — we're going to publicly toss it aside and say that in return, we are expecting these massive benefits.

And in this case, it really is a first-rate arms deal, which as we know is the majority of what US aid to Israel also is. It's the crème de la crème, top-of-the-line arms deal to the state of Israel — for both its interests against the Palestinians and oppressing the Palestinians and also to bolster its regional interests, particularly as a favored partner of the United States.

Yara Hawari 12:13

Now that you've really laid out so clearly how this just isn't about Israel and how it's connected so much to regional dynamics, I wanted to move globally. Recently we've seen a convergence of global grassroots movements which have included vocal solidarity with Palestine, and these movements and activists have been challenging the US "business as usual" policy when it comes to Israel.

And there are now more and more people globally calling for conditioning, sanctioning, and halting US military aid to Israel. How has that come about, and what does it look like on the ground in the US?

Nadya Tannous 12:57

I can start with a recent example of this. So we have both become used to Israel's preferential treatment and the constant restocking of their weaponry through US aid.

I guess before I start this comment, I want to honor the longstanding vocal supporters of Palestinian dignity and self-determination who have always spoken out against these policies. Even though it's expected, we know that it is unjust to let the United States and Israel carry on with business as usual.

But realistically, in the previous years, those numbers of vocal supporters for Palestine were much lower or much quieter than they are now in the United States. So I think in light of the developments on the ground in Palestine during the Unity Intifada — and for the US context, still being in the shadow of the George Floyd and Breonna Taylor uprisings — some of the pushback from the grassroots level really caught on at the congressional level.

So on May 5th, Congress was notified of the $735 million commercial sale of precision-guided weapons to Israel, which initiated a 15-day period when Congress members may object. And that's routine.

So what happened then between May 5th and May 20th was gruesome. It was an onslaught of Israeli colonial violence, including airstrikes on Gaza that killed 243 Palestinians. And at the tail end of the 15-day period, then-representatives Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Rashida Tlaib, Mark Pocan, and Bernie Sanders proposed a series of bills to halt this transaction — the $735 million commercial sale.

On May 13th, Representatives Ilhan Omar, Ayanna Pressley, Cori Bush, Rashida Tlaib, and others in the Squad gathered in the US Congress and publicly expressed support for the Palestinian people and called for an end to funding Israeli military aggression. And that was a big deal. I had never seen — we had never seen — something like this done on the floor.

And I think even newcomer Representative Marie Newman called on the State Department to condemn the ethnic cleansing of Sheikh Jarrah as a violation of international law. And they used terms in both cases, like apartheid, to describe Israel as a state. Again, language never before spoken in those halls by people in power.

And those words were inherited from years of grassroots organizing, advocacy work, and solidarity initiatives on behalf of the Palestinian people and their right to self-determination — our right to self-determination.

Also the presentation — when I think about Cori Bush, for example, she connected militarized policing, anti-war movements. They connected anti-occupation, anti-apartheid with social justice and collective liberation with Palestinian liberation.

And in the so-called United States, grassroots movements of Palestine supporters have taken to the streets en masse across all major cities this summer and late spring. And they called out the grotesque imbalance of power and poked holes in the stale peace discourse that distracts from Israeli military aggression, expanding systems of control, and all the racist tropes that confine Palestinian resistance to

terrorism. And they hold us to a standard that Israel does not confine itself to and the US would never hold Israel to, right? This is the obvious double standard between the support of the colonizer and the colonized.

And so I think online and social media campaigns that have critiqued the US's direct contribution to the onslaught against Palestinians have also demanded that political representatives do something about this. And so the US's blank check to Israel has been particularly front and center in terms of folks bringing it forward and saying, "This is ridiculous. We have to do something."

Yara Hawari 17:11

If you're enjoying this podcast, please visit our website, al-shabaka.org, where you'll find more Palestinian policy analysis, and where you can join our mailing list and donate to support our work.

Nadya Tannous 17:25

I did want to highlight briefly — back to the Abraham Accords — specifically some examples that we can extrapolate from that first-rate weapons deal.

So for example, just to bring in the Arab states: the United Arab Emirates publicly noted upon signing the deal that they were expecting 50 F-35 fighter jets and 18 armed Reaper drones as part of the $23.37 billion arms deal approved by the Trump administration.

And so all of this is in exchange for normalization. This is a massive military package — $23.37 billion — and the prospect of Arab countries receiving the same caliber of weapons as the Israeli state most certainly was a motivator for normalization by those same states.

I think what's important is that it wove these Arab nations into the central support for Israeli security and hegemony in the region. And that alone puts them in direct

contradiction with Palestine and aspirations for Palestinian freedom. These Arab countries have publicly signed themselves up to serve US and Israeli interests in the region at large.

And so when we continue and we say, okay, we have this massive military package being offered to the UAE and then also Bahrain, and then we add the $735 million commercial sale to Israel that was proposed in May — aside from that commercial deal, the US is also scheduled to send $3.3 billion to Israel in foreign military financing, or FMF, and an additional $500 million for joint US-Israeli research, development, and deployment of a missile defense system.

And then in June, Israel was forecasted to request US Congress for another $1 billion to restock the Iron Dome and to upgrade the system, which would put the FMF at $4.3 billion. There have not been any developments to my knowledge at this time, but we are watching what is happening.

So I think, Yara, it seems that Americans are realizing that this money is going in droves to violence against and direct onslaughts against Palestinians. And they're also becoming aware that this package to Israel and normalizing Arab nations is also going to oppress other people in the region. So if we look at why some of these weapons are being stockpiled, we can see that they are being used to further the crisis in Yemen and also as part of an ongoing regional calculation against Iran.

And so I think that for US representatives and for the US political system, they have to understand that support for Israel by them and by the United States is not just costly in terms of financial responsibilities — I just listed out some whopping sums. It's expensive to upkeep this military might and hegemony. But it also has the potential to become politically costly as well, both in domestic politics and on the international scale.

While the projected numbers for military aid to Israel only go upwards, public

opinion is actually shifting, and US residents and the global community are demanding accountability. Finally, in May, the *Los Angeles Times* referenced a Gallup study reporting a massive surge in support for Palestine over the past decade, moving from one in seven Americans primarily sympathizing with Palestine to now one in four.

I think the United States representatives who stepped forward, and many of those who did not, need to account for the shift in public support and position when it comes to the Palestinian people.

Yara Hawari 21:41

I think it's really important to note, as you did Nadya, in your answer, that the Squad questioning US military support, the use of words such as apartheid in the halls of Congress — this is not just random, or this has not just happened overnight, but rather this is on the back of years, if not decades, of organizing by Palestinians and their allies.

And it's also linked to joining the Palestinian struggle up with other justice movements. And I think that's incredibly important. I think it's also incredibly important, as you did, to link these weapons deals with other weapons deals — that these normalization agreements are not just a betrayal of the Palestinian struggle, but it's also the beginning of a new era of massive human rights abuses across the region, which will be funded and bankrolled by the US.

I was quite hit by that statistic that you mentioned at the end of your intervention, when you noted that whereas previously one in seven Americans have been in support of the Palestinian struggle, now it's one in four. And that's quite massive. And that, along with everything else that's going on, it seems to be quite a transformational moment in the history of Palestinian solidarity and critique of Israel, certainly in the US.

So I wanted to ask you: how do you think this can be galvanized upon in the struggle for Palestinian rights?

Nadya Tannous 23:12

I know that there are mass campaigns in the works going directly at military aid and militarism itself. So we've seen a few preliminary mobilizations against Boeing in the city of Chicago, for example, who are direct manufacturers of F-35s and precision missiles being sold to Israel and normalizing Arab nations. They also happen to hold a contract with the city of Chicago that's up for renewal this year. People came out en masse to say they don't want the contract to be renewed with their city.

Other targets such as Raytheon, Elbit, General Dynamics — they also contribute to the running of F-35 fighter jets, F-16s. It's clear that anti-militarism is something that many movements can get behind. These systems of control and destruction, as we've both mentioned here, extend far beyond Palestine. Boeing sales to the Philippines, for example, facilitate gruesome oppression of peoples and peasant movements there.

And Elbit Systems are complicit in creating the infrastructure right now for the US-Mexico border apparatus, which exacerbates violence to incoming migrants and Native communities along the border — and so many people every day. Elbit is part of building that out. So I think we have to see the impacts that these weapon manufacturers are having on different movements and also call into question the US military, period.

The People's Embargo, for example, is a grassroots and NGO-linked initiative coming out of the Palestine solidarity movement and anti-militarism partnership, and it's growing. It's offering a vision to coordinate advocacy opportunities with grassroots campaigns and a container for organizing direct action. At its best, it would target multiple aspects of military aid and weapons manufacturing

machines.

I think in terms of advocacy opportunities with actual material impacts on the Israeli occupation, we've seen some major developments. So in the spring and early summer of this year, we have the resolutions put forward against the $735 million commercial sale.

In November, members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, led by Robert Menendez out of New Jersey, introduced a series of resolutions against the weapon sale and buttressed Israel's Qualitative Military Edge.

Ilhan Omar of Minnesota also countered the pending weapons deal under the Abraham Accords with stronger wording to ban the sale altogether, citing UAE human rights violations.

Representative Betty McCollum of Minnesota also submitted her HR 2590 on April 15th, which is the bill to "Defend the Human Rights of Palestinian Children and Families Living Under Israeli Military Occupation." And it was signed by over 17 other representatives. And that bill really aims to ensure that US funding is not used to sustain the Israeli military judicial system and forced displacement of Palestinians through home demolitions and evictions and illegal annexations of Palestinian lands.

So I think that we should interpret these bills, presented in courageous times, as part of the genealogy of, yes, our people's movements and their resonance and impacts in Congress, but also as part of a different genealogy, which is the Leahy Law, which provides the foundation for conditioning military aid due to human rights violations.

So I think McCollum's bill in particular comes as part of a growing movement to condition US aid to Israel — meaning to halt US aid to Israel in response to carrying out sweeping human rights abuses. Additionally, Representatives Bernie

Sanders and even Elizabeth Warren have openly confirmed their willingness to restrict US aid to Israel — meaning to withhold money from any Israeli institution or military branch that is responsible for those human rights abuses.

And the issue with this model, I think, is the extreme fungibility of Israel's aid and their ability to just shuffle funds between departments and bodies of their choosing, because they receive so much US assistance in cash.

So on top of that, most lawmakers will never hold Israel's military actions to the same standard or rubric that they will continue to hold other countries in the region accountable to. So there's much less political will, I should say, to condition military aid, because they would never label Israeli colonial violence as a human rights violation.

But we know that things are moving considerably, and so that certainly shouldn't be taken off the table. But I am very much speaking to the context that we're in now — not what we're hoping for or other aspirations.

But I think, Yara, the point is that Israel continues to be exceptionalized. So as Salih Booker from the Center for International Policy points out, Israel is the only country in the world for which the United States does not track which weapons go to which military unit — which makes it virtually impossible to enforce the Leahy Law requirements that prohibit using funds for assistance to foreign forces implicated in human rights violations.

I think, with all that said, nevertheless, as Boeing and military companies are put in the spotlight through these city-wide campaigns — and hopefully through many more coming — when we see mass political will reflected on the floor of the Senate, we are called to seriously look into the S in Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions and to increase our demands for material shifts to US aid.

Grassroots organizers and advocates for Palestine are called upon by Palestinians

at home to put together a plan to mitigate more US funding and harm. And conditioning and restricting aid to Israel as an expansion of the S — of sanctions — in a way we haven't seen before.

I think it's clear that discourse around peace deals serves as a distraction from real and unwavering Israeli military aggression and expanding systems of control. I see that more and more grassroots organizers and advocates are calling that out.

I think we must ask ourselves as people on the left, as progressives: if sanctions can ever be an acceptable tool of the left to push back against an ally of the United States itself. Can sanctions break apart from an oppressive tool of the right, which uses them to devastate US adversaries globally?

So I think that if we ever need inspiration for the fight moving forward, we should always look to the grassroots and to the people's movements who struggle against systems of oppression and who are struggling against these systems of imperialism from the United States as if it were common sense — because realistically, it absolutely is.

We have made huge advances in pushing back against the "business as usual" US military aid and direct weapon sales to the Israeli state to be used as part of repression on the ground in Palestine. I think we have been able to achieve some major — at least narrative gains — and manufacture political will in our representatives in a way that we previously have not even thought was possible.

Yara Hawari 31:25

Nadya, thank you so much for joining me. I could keep talking to you about this topic. I think you brought up some really important questions and certainly some things that I haven't thought about before — namely questioning whether sanctions can be used as a tool for the left.

I think it's also important to stress that things like Betty McCollum's bill are not

particularly radical. It doesn't ask for Israel to stop incarcerating and torturing children. It just asks that US taxpayer dollars don't go towards incarcerating and torturing Palestinian children. I think that puts it into perspective a little bit on how much work is left to be done, certainly in these institutional spaces, and questions actually whether we can use these spaces and how much energy should be put into those spaces.

So thank you again so much for joining me. And you mentioned several times throughout this podcast the policy brief which you are writing for Al-Shabaka, which will be published very soon, and we look forward to that so much.

Nadya Tannous 32:35

Yara, I love that you said that, because I think a big question here is: how much can you ask for the settler colonial state itself to regulate the actions of another settler colonial state? How much can we really ask of a state that's born out of occupation and imperialism to contain or manage any imperial interests abroad? It is indeed their nature to support it.

Yara Hawari 33:00

Nadya, thank you so much for that final but important comment!

Nadya Tannous 33:03

Thank you, Yara.

Yara Hawari 33:05

Thank you for listening to Rethinking Palestine. Don't forget to subscribe and leave us a review. For more policy analysis and to donate to support our work, please visit our website, al-shabaka.org. You can also follow us on Facebook and Twitter.

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.

Al-Shabaka materials may be circulated with due attribution to Al-Shabaka: The Palestinian Policy Network. The opinion of individual members of Al-Shabaka's policy network do not necessarily reflect the views of the organization as a whole.