



Young people, new story: How the Israeli-Palestinian standoff might get a better script

By AMY FICKLING — September 18, 2012

WASHINGTON — Social media are credited with spreading the risings in the Middle East that started last year and toppled several long-held governments. Young people in these countries were making their feelings known, participating in politics on some level that brought about change. The so-called "Arab Spring" movement came before, and well may have precipitated, the Occupy Wall Street movement in the U.S., which began in the fall of 2011.

U.S. foreign aid to countries in the Middle East region make Americans more than just interested observers, pondering whether fledgling attempts at democracy in the Arab world will take root.

Israel was the recipient of 42.6 percent of the FY11 U.S. aid to the Middle East, according to a recent presentation on Capitol Hill, sponsored by libertarian think tank Cato Institute, by the Jerusalem Institute for Market Studies, drawing on State Department and Congressional Research Service data. The next largest recipient in the region, at 21.9 percent of U.S. Middle East aid, is Egypt. Jordan, Palestine, Lebanon are the main other recipients, which include Algeria, Kuwait, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia and Yemen.

Mitt Romney, before the Republican Party officially made him its candidate for the fall presidential election in late August, put the Middle East on his campaign agenda, making a trip to Israel after he first visited the 2012 Olympic venue in London. Romney sought to highlight his long-time friendship with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and used the visit to try to make an impression on Americans living in Israel who will be voting in the U.S. election this fall.

President Barack Obama stole a little of his rival's limelight, signing the United States-Israel Enhanced Security Cooperation Act on July 27, the day before Romney was to arrive in Israel. The law provides Israel with \$70 million in military support and increases cooperation between the U.S. and Israeli militaries.

According to the Jerusalem Institute's data in the Capitol Hill same presentation, Israel receives \$3.025 billion in aid that is tied to military uses - 73.7 percent of the U.S. aid must be spent to buy U.S. military equipment. The U.S. aid is about 18 percent to 22 percent of the Israeli defense budget, and there are some in Israel who think their country would be better off without it, though 59 percent polled in August on behalf of the Jerusalem Institute said Israel would be somewhat (19 percent) or much (40 percent) worse off if all U.S. aid to Israel and the rest of the Arab world were stopped altogether.

Women (59 percent), younger people (18-24, 64 percent; 25-34, 54 percent) and those who identified as religious (58 percent) were more likely to think that weapons purchased by Egypt using U.S. aid will be used against Israel, the Jerusalem Institute noted.

In July, three think tanks - The Center for a New American Security, the New America Foundation and the American Enterprise Institute - hosted a forum in Washington, D.C., called "Election 2012: Informing the National Security Agenda."

One of the forum speakers, former State Department and National Security Council official Dennis Ross, who was a special assistant to Obama for the Middle East, Afghanistan and South Asia from 2009 to 2011, remarked that one area of the "Arab Awakening" that "no one is paying attention to" is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Egypt, Libya, Syria and Iran dominate the conversation, or did at the time.

He said both sides in the conflict can make "a really good case for why each perceives things as they do." The challenge, then, is to reconcile two "rights," or two "right" ways of perceiving things. What can you do to change their perceptions, he wondered, "so they can get out of stasis." He said that if the U.S. continues "on the path we're on . . . the options for changing perceptions shrinks."

Ross, now at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy as counselor and Ziegler Distinguished Fellow, was U.S. Middle East envoy when he assisted Israelis and Palestinians in reaching the 1995 Interim Agreement on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip and brokered the Protocol Concerning the Redeployment in Hebron in 1997. He also was involved with talks between Israel and Syria.

He said "the story in the region is being written by the people in the region . . . not by us in the U.S."

He emphasized that if the two sides in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict don't do anything to change the dynamic there, "there will not be progress, so the U.S. might have to broker something."

He offered six suggestions for each side to begin to move forward. The ones for Israel (among them, to provide voluntary compensation for those settlers who would leave the West Bank), he said, "would send a message to Palestinians that they are not about just a land grab." For Palestinians, he suggested acknowledgment of historical connections with Israel, along with talking about the two states, and ceasing to take the position of victim.

Ross also pointed to the youth in the Arab world who are behind the "Awakening," saying that now that the Internet has allowed them to compare themselves with others around the world, and they have begun to look upon themselves as citizens, with "a right to make demands," they need to find a way to organize themselves so they can form the basis for new governments.

This past summer, a select group of youths from Israel and Palestine were in Washington to prepare for just that. Under the auspices of the New Story Leadership for the Middle East project, which has as its mission the empowering of "the next generation of international leaders to reinvigorate a stale political climate in the region," the young men and women experienced American culture, its democratic government and political arena, and interaction with each other designed to forge a new dialogue between nations and the basis for progress when they take their new leadership skills back home with them.

Here are some of the thoughts that poured out when five of the participants shared their impressions of experiences in the U.S., in contrast with their upbringing in a conflict zone, at a Congressional Forum in the Rayburn House Office Building in Washington on July 19.

NOA SHAPIRA, Haifa, Israel, 22

What I am learning more about is the relationship between the United States and Israel, and how it is grounded in foreign aid, that has gradually grown to \$3.1 billion a year. The special bond between the two countries is undeniable - but it has an obstacle. Let me explain:

I define myself progressive. But the progressive voice is weak in the Israeli political system. And yet - the Israeli left shares the values America stands for, and sends her children to fight for overseas: democracy; morality; equal human rights to all regardless of religion, race and gender. These values are pushed aside in the

Israeli discourse. Meanwhile, the reactionary government gets funds that preserve the status quo of the conflict.

Every year, lobbyists who live comfortably in New York, Boston - thousands of miles away from the conflict zone - lobby in favor of that yearly grant. They influence decisions that are being made right here - on this Hill - regarding my life.

You may think that the American taxpayer money supports a policy that promotes peace and stability. Unfortunately, I believe it does the opposite.

Interning for the Obama campaign (this summer) taught me that this election revolves around the economy, and foreign policy issues will not sway a voter to change his mind. The world and the American public have gotten used to our conflict. Out of sight out of mind. . . .

I want to say: Reality is complicated, more complicated than Israel vs. Palestine. Don't choose sides. But on the other hand, don't let us get away from our responsibility to reach a solution as soon as possible. . . . I feel the fierce urgency of the now. . . . after the people of Tunisia, Libya and Egypt have overthrown dark regimes, Israeli society is starting to open its eyes.

. . . When I go home . . . I will join the demonstrations in the streets of Tel Aviv. I will do all that I can to combine the voice of peace with the voice of social justice. . . . Hopefully, in about 20 years I will come back here, to this building - as an elected official of my country. This summer has taught me that no matter how appealing the American dream may look to a foreigner, there is one place in the world where I am needed the most - and that is home.

OR AMIR, Rishon Le-Ziyyon, Israel, 25

I am: female, Israeli, Jewish, secular, Moroccan, Zionist, a former IDF officer who still serves in the Reserve, a B.A Student and volunteer. What do you think about me now?

All of the above are labels. Labels are like a window to our destiny and future, but instead of helping us see it, they are preventing us from having it at all.

I had a wonderful childhood . . . I remember that as a child my parents used to take us, and still do so, to the old markets of Tel Aviv and Jaffa. Friday mornings, the smell of the Turkish coffee, hot-fresh falafel and hummus, shisha's apple tobacco smoke mixed in the air with the breeze of the sea and fish. All the colors, the different shades of red, blue, yellow and green, all the different people, ages, languages, music, smells and cultures were like different strings which in the end

came together to a beautiful Middle-Eastern hand-made carpet. . . . In a way I'm an Secular Israeli Moroccan Jew to who the Palestinian and the Arab culture were always a part of her life without knowing it, recognizing it or meeting any of them in such a personal way as I'm doing in our program.

I also know that there isn't a magic solution. I know we need to invest time, energy and effort in all the small changes. But before we do so, please, do not force us to live the past.

The world is changing right now, we are changing right now, I am changing right now... To stay where we were years ago, not to dare, not to dream and not to hope, feels to me like my future isn't really mine.

So in front of you today, I am letting go of the past. . . . I'm not going to carry any fault or guilt for the actions of previous generations, as you may think I should. I am letting go. I'm not blaming the Palestinian nation for all the pain that Israel has been through because of a couple of extremists. I am starting a new story with these magnificent people who are here with me today.

LIOR FRANKIENSZTAJN, Israel, by way of South America

Lior served as an officer for five years in the IDF, dealing with daily communication with the international community in the Gaza Strip. He is a second-year student of social science at the Interdisciplinary Center in Herzliya, Israel.

We are young people who represent hope for a better . . . more prosperous and more secure future. Americans, you are our friends.

I am here today to say events in our region cannot be allowed to continue . . . cannot be accepted.

I want Americans not to just accept that we are in conflict, but to ask why?

MARY SAYEJ, Ramallah, Palestine, 22

Palestinian society is evolving. We stopped victimizing ourselves long ago. We are no longer helpless, powerless people devoid of capacities! I know you hear about martyrs, death, bombings and tragedies, but we also graduate from schools, get married, have babies and celebrate successes.. . . Getting a good education, and pursuing higher education are major values in my family. . . . Despite the fact that I am living in a socially, politically and economically challenged area, my parents overcame their protective (and sometimes overprotective) nature and gave me

every opportunity to grow and further my education. From a very young age, I was encouraged to get involve in different organizations and programs. . . .

As a Palestinian woman, who has been granted the opportunity to stand here before you; it is my privilege to be part of a long line of Palestinian women who played major roles in our society since the beginning of our conflict with Israel.

. . . Living in Ramallah, the center of the West Bank, and what many people consider the economic capital of Palestine, I have also come to realize, that I am living in an economy that is very dependent on foreign aid. Last May, I graduated with a degree in Business Economics from Birzeit University. My dissertation elaborated upon the impact of foreign aid on the Palestinian economy. One of the main conclusions I drew was that due to Palestinian dependency on foreign aid, the productivity of Palestinians is decreasing. Therefore, in order to boost Palestinian productivity, Palestine must wean itself off its dependency on foreign aid, so that Palestinians can achieve greater self sufficiency and autonomy in the future.

. . . we must invest more in supporting our entrepreneurs and strengthening our business and economic base, and ensuring that women will be at the center of this investment.

DIA MAJEDLAH, Tulkarm, Palestine, 18

I'm a Palestinian, a descendant of a family of refugees from Haifa. My story goes back to 1948, when my family was forced into exile, into the unknown. Luckily enough, I was given everything I needed to make my life worth living, but that's not how things go with other refugee families.

In 2000, the agreement that was to be the bedrock for a peaceful solution to the conflict had collapsed. . . .

Words can never explain the raw tragedy, which both societies have to endure. As I grew up during the second Intifada, events around me shaped my life in a way or another. Bombings, curfews, checkpoints, blood and tears absorbed by the land, graveyards flooded with coffins, that is all I remember about growing up in that place. I had so much hate held in my chest, for the way my childhood and future were stolen. . . .

As a Palestinian in the United States, I experienced a huge amount of misconceptions. A large part of the American society portrays Palestinians as people who are thirsty for blood. The American mainstream media has done a

great job in forming these stereotypes. My response to this is: Not every Palestinian is a terrorist, and not every terrorist is a Palestinian.

. . . On one hand, we, as Palestinians, have our own battles to fight on our own soil. We do acknowledge the fact that a house divided against itself cannot stand. But I do not come in your house and tell you where to put your own furniture, so our internal issues should be solved by us, and only us.

. . . Things are getting more complicated every day, and the status-quo is killing the two state solution. The solution must be based on common interests, and must be architected in a way that is sustainable. That is the reason why we're here. . . . We are here to understand, in order to create and not destroy.

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