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Should U.S. Be More Involved In Israeli-Palestinian 'Peace Process'? 

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By Ivan Eland

The Obama administration is eager to solve the Israeli-Palestinian problem—both to make the president seem less naïve for having believed he could broker the chronic dispute quickly and to lessen the motivation for radical Islamists that attack the United States in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere. The administration is even debating internally whether to field its own Middle East peace proposal. However, although U.S. support for Israel is a cause of anti-U.S. violent jihadism, it is part of a broader motivation, and an active U.S. attempt to solve the Israeli-Palestinian dispute might actually make Islamist terrorism worse.

The administration's line of reasoning apparently emanates from David Petraeus, the commander of U.S. forces in the Middle East, who has alluded to the link between lack of resolution of the Palestine issue and the ardor of anti-U.S. militant Islamists. The aggressive Israeli lobby has pounced on even Petraeus' subtle conclusion and criticized him as saying that U.S. support for Israel fuels militant Islamism. Of course, Petraeus dared not go that far to such a politically incorrect conclusion, but everyone, including the lobby, knew what he was thinking.

The problem is that he is only half right—at least in the case of al-Qaeda, which should be America's primary concern (rather than worrying about Islamist militants who are focused on local issues, such as the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Iraq). Osama bin Laden, the founder of al-Qaeda, started out attacking the United States for what he believes is its "infidel" occupation of Muslim lands, or its support for corrupt rulers in those countries. Of course, by extension, he regards Israel and the occupied territories as Muslim lands having been stolen by infidels. And he regards Israel as the Americans' neo-colonial

proxy.

Thus, reality is wider than Petraeus' line of reasoning, and it undermines his implicit argument that solving the Palestine problem is the key to reducing the lure of Islamist radicalism. Although his line of reasoning is risky—indirectly taking on the powerful Israeli lobby—it serves to divert attention from a wider conclusion that could adversely affect the U.S. military bureaucracy. If Americans finally realized, almost a decade after the Islamists' motivations for the 9/11 strikes should have been discussed, that the primary motivation of the diabolical attacks was revenge for the U.S. occupation of Muslim countries—either directly or through perceived proxies—or intervention in them, the U.S. military might very well face the prospect of being withdrawn from its extensive presence overseas and losing a significant portion of its funding. Instead, Petraeus is attempting to channel the administration's efforts into yet more interventionism—which motivates the anti-U.S. attacks in the first place—to make his life easier, without examining the larger issue, which could cause his institution major convulsions.

But wouldn't it be nice for the United States to solve the Palestine problem to either safeguard other U.S. security interests or to act as a Good Samaritan to help the Israelis and Palestinians achieve peace and resultant prosperity?

First, there are no other U.S. security interests that slavish support for Israel satisfies. The Cold War is over, and so is the need for the need for an isolated pro-U.S. outpost in the Middle East. In fact, the same U.S. government that usually faithfully backs Israel worries itself silly over the flow of oil, which is located mainly in Arab or Islamic countries hostile to Israel. The close U.S.-Israeli relationship is counterproductive to this stated U.S. interest. So the perennial U.S. push to solve the Israeli-Palestinian stalemate is borne of domestic politics rather than of any compelling impetus based on U.S. security.

Second, U.S. involvement in trying to solve the intractable problem in Palestine—violence has been occurring there since the 1920s—merely convinces Islamist radicals that the United States is trying to help Israel legitimize the stealing of even more Arab land in the occupied territories. And it is difficult for the U.S. to be an honest broker in the dispute because of domestic pressure to be on Israel's side.

Finally, Petraeus' line of reasoning assumes that the Palestine issue can be resolved. Experts have clearly delineated possible compromises on paper, but mutual hatred and distrust between the Israelis and Palestinians prevent obvious solutions (to everyone else) from being agreed to and implemented. Heavy U.S. involvement and then likely failure is liable to highlight for Islamist radicals the belief that the impossibility of the U.S. being an honest broker in the conflict makes America complicit in one more continuing occupation by infidels of a Muslim land. Therefore, Islamist radicals' stoked anger could lead to even more anti-U.S. attacks.

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