

The following three essays, by Steve Sheffey, Stephen Zunes, and Matthew RJ Brodsky, speak to the heated and contentious debate raging over the Obama Administration's Israel policy.



## President Obama and the United Nations

STEVE SHEFFEY

President Barack Obama's special envoy on anti-Semitism, Hannah Rosenthal, observed in 2010, "Looking at U.N. statistics over the last six years, where there have been negative remarks against a country, 170 have been against Israel. Compare that to North Korea that had eight... Israel has had 50 resolutions condemning alleged human rights abuses. Compare that to the Sudan which has had five. Clearly Israel is being held to a different standard and that means it [the U.N.] has crossed the line from anti-Israel policy to profound anti-Semitism."<sup>1</sup>

The United States contributes 22 percent of the U.N.'s regular operating budget, which came to upward of 582 million dollars in 2010.<sup>2</sup> Taking into account U.S. contributions to the U.N. peacekeeping budget and contributions to other U.N. agencies, the total U.S. contribution in 2010 was 7.69 billion dollars.<sup>3</sup> Where some have suggested that the U.S. respond by cutting funding for the U.N. or boycotting its committees, Obama has charted a wiser course.

The Obama administration has pursued a policy of active engagement at the U.N. to fight efforts to delegitimize Israel. In 2010, Obama told the U.N. General Assembly that "Israel's existence must not be a subject for debate," and that "efforts to chip away at Israel's legitimacy will only be met by the unshakable opposition of the United States."<sup>4</sup> And the Obama administration succeeded in pushing through the toughest set of sanctions against Iran ever enacted by the U.N. Security Council.<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps most significant, the Obama administration cast its only veto in the U.N. Security Council against the biased anti-Israel resolution on settlements and promised to veto any U.N. Security Council resolution recognizing an independent Palestinian state of Palestine.<sup>6</sup>

The Obama administration opposed the report of the U.N. Fact Finding Mission on the Gaza Conflict, popularly known as the Goldstone Report in reference to its author, Justice Richard Goldstone. Israel's ambassador to the United States, Michael Oren, said, "The administration came out with a statement against Goldstone that was from our perspective just perfect — condemned it as a travesty

of justice, upheld Israel's right not just to defend itself but to investigate itself during its own military operations."<sup>7</sup>

Although Obama won nearly 80 percent of the Jewish vote in 2008, some maintain that the Jewish vote could be in play in 2012 even though there is little statistical evidence to support this claim<sup>8</sup> and even though Obama's record is solidly pro-Israel.<sup>9</sup> The Obama administration worked feverishly in September 2011 to prevent or defeat a vote on Palestinian statehood in the U.N. Security Council and to muster as many votes as possible to diminish the impact of a non-binding vote in the General Assembly. By maintaining that only direct negotiations between the parties can lead to peace, President Obama put the Palestinian Authority in the position of either forgoing their U.N. statehood bid and returning to the negotiating table, or refusing to negotiate, thus weakening their credibility and increasing the likelihood that more countries would join the U.S. in opposing U.N. support for Palestinian statehood.

In a speech described by the Israeli newspaper *Yehidot Aharonot* as the most pro-Israel speech ever given by an American president at the U.N., Obama told the world that "America's commitment to Israel's security is unshakable" and that "Israel deserves recognition. It deserves normal relations with its neighbors."<sup>10</sup>

This type of consistent engagement at the U.N. has been essential in attempting to redress the efforts to isolate and delegitimize Israel. In response to criticism from Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL), the chair of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, and others who believe that instead of engaging at the U.N., the U.S. should first demand reforms and only then fund the U.N.,<sup>11</sup> Assistant Secretary of State for International Organization Affairs Esther Brimmer said, "President Obama's decision to pay our U.N. assessments in full has given us greater influence with allies, partners, and others, and helped us achieve both our policy goals at the U.N. as well as much-needed management reform and budget discipline."<sup>12</sup>

Prior administrations that generally supported Israel at the U.N. sometimes chose not to veto anti-Israel resolutions. For example, the

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.jpost.com/JewishWorld/JewishNews/Article.aspx?id=170435>

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.un.org/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=ST/ADM/SER.B/824](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=ST/ADM/SER.B/824)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.cnsnews.com/news/article/obama-administration-cites-progress-un-slams-republican-critics>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.state.gov/p/io/rm/2011/166223.htm>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/10/world/middleeast/10sanctions.html>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.state.gov/p/io/rm/2011/166223.htm>

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.njdc.org/media/entry/goldstone\\_israel\\_adler](http://www.njdc.org/media/entry/goldstone_israel_adler)

<sup>8</sup> <http://washingtonjewishweek.com/main.asp?SectionID=4&SubSectionID=14&ArticleID=15718>

<sup>9</sup> <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424053111904060604576574521495803288.html>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.nationaljournal.com/whitehouse/obama-s-speech-to-the-un-general-assembly-as-prepared-20110921>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/26/world/26nations.html>

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.cnsnews.com/news/article/obama-administration-cites-progress-un-slams-republican-critics>

<sup>13</sup> <http://blogs.jta.org/politics/article/2011/02/17/2743029/missing-the-resolution-not-missing-an-opportunity-to-miss-an-opportunity>

<sup>14</sup> [http://www.un.org/News/dh/infocus/hr\\_council/hr\\_q\\_and\\_a.htm](http://www.un.org/News/dh/infocus/hr_council/hr_q_and_a.htm)

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/03/31/AR2009033102782.html>

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.jta.org/news/article/2009/03/31/1004147/in-reversal-us-to-join-un-rights-council>

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0409/20881.html>

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2011/03/159343.htm>

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2011/03/159343.htm>

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.state.gov/p/io/rm/2011/166223.htm>

<sup>21</sup> <http://blogs.jta.org/politics/article/2011/09/20/3089493/how-much-of-susan-rices-job-is-about-israel>

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.njdc.org/blog/post/ricetestimony040611>

<sup>23</sup> <http://blogs.jta.org/politics/article/2011/09/20/3089493/how-much-of-susan-rices-job-is-about-israel>

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.nationaljournal.com/whitehouse/obama-s-speech-to-the-un-general-assembly-as-prepared-20110921>

Bush administration neglected to veto a 2004 U.N. Security Council resolution calling on Israel to stop demolishing Palestinian homes.<sup>13</sup> The Reagan administration supported a U.N. Security Council resolution condemning Israel for its 1981 attack on Iraq's nuclear reactor.

In 2006, the U.N. General Assembly created the U.N. Human Rights Council (UNHRC) to address human rights violations<sup>14</sup> and to replace the U.N. Human Rights Commission, which had lost credibility because it included countries with poor human rights records.<sup>15</sup> The Bush administration refused to join the UNHRC because it believed that the UNHRC was not much better than the Human Rights Commission and that the U.S. could make a stronger statement by not participating.

Before the U.S. joined the UNHRC in 2009, the UNHRC passed 32 resolutions, of which 26 were critical of Israel.<sup>16</sup> The Bush administration refused to engage UNHRC, thus leaving the council to Israel's enemies. U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Susan Rice explained that the Obama administration joined the UNHRC to battle the "anti-Israel crap."<sup>17</sup>

By engaging with the UNHRC, the U.S. not only leveraged its power to defend Israel, but it also helped shift attention to what the UNHRC should have been focusing on during its years of neglect under the Bush administration: freedom of assembly and association, woman's rights, the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) community's rights, and religious rights.<sup>18</sup> The U.S. also spearheaded U.N. efforts to highlight human rights abuses faced by the LGBT community around the world.<sup>19</sup> And the U.S. "led

unprecedented resolutions condemning human rights abuses in Libya, Iran and then Syria and putting in place mechanisms to document abuses and hold those governments to account" at the UNHRC.<sup>20</sup>

These are important ends in themselves, and they also serve to diminish the council's disproportionate focus on Israel, which is a product of both the Arab world's efforts to delegitimize Israel and efforts by certain countries to deflect attention from their own human rights violations.

It is clear that Hannah Rosenthal and Susan Rice understand that the UNHRC and the U.N. in general are laden with anti-Israel sentiment and that engagement with the U.N. and its agencies is the best way to combat that sentiment. For Rice, defending Israel at the U.N. is, in her words, "a significant part of my job."<sup>21</sup>

So what is the rationale for the commitment Obama made in September 2010 before the U.N. General Assembly? At the time, he said, "It should be clear to all that efforts to chip away at Israel's legitimacy will only be met by the unshakeable opposition of the United States."<sup>22</sup> According to Rice, it's simple: "We're doing what we think is right."<sup>23</sup> As President Obama told the U.N. in September 2011, the "Jewish people have forged a successful state in their historic homeland. Israel deserves recognition. It deserves normal relations with its neighbors. And friends of the Palestinians do them no favors by ignoring this truth, just as friends of Israel must recognize the need to pursue a two-state solution with a secure Israel next to an independent Palestine."<sup>24</sup>



## Netanyahu's Policies Do Not Help Israel

STEPHEN ZUNES

Steve Sheffey is certainly correct in recognizing the counterproductive ramifications of anti-United Nations efforts by the Republicans and in defending the Obama administration from attacks by the far right that falsely accuse him of not defending Israel. Unfortunately, he falls into the same trap as the Republicans he criticizes by accepting much of the narrative of Israel's current right-wing government and by supporting Washington's defense of that government. While it is certainly appropriate to acknowledge and challenge the anti-Israel bias often found in the U.N. and elsewhere, he flips to the other extreme by

embracing an anti-Palestine bias.

For example, Sheffey refers to an otherwise-unanimous U.N. Security Council resolution vetoed by the Obama administration last February as being "biased" and "anti-Israel." The draft resolution, however, simply called on both Israelis and Palestinians to act on the basis of international law, other obligations, and previous agreements; to help advance the peace process through confidence-building measures and continued negotiations on final status issues; and for regional actors and the international community to support the peace process. The resolution specifically reaffirmed previous

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