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Manny Rodriguez

manuel.rodriguez@trincoll.edu

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The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict in the Trump Era: A Human Rights Perspective

Manny Rodriguez
Human Rights Studies Senior Project
Trinity College -- Hartford, CT
May 2020

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Abstract

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been an ongoing war in the Middle East that began in the mid-20th century. Over the last seventy years, the region has been characterized by widespread violence and war as disputes over territory and religious freedom have heightened tensions between the Israelis and Palestinians. Many countries, especially the United States, have attempted to resolve the conflict and bring peace to the region. Since the conflict started, U.S. presidents, both Republican and Democrat alike, have generally maintained a similar, pro-Israel approach while attempting to be inclusive of the Palestinian community. However, the election of Donald J. Trump has dramatically shifted U.S. policy towards the conflict that has ultimately made the situation worse. President Trump's aggressive support of Israel has stifled peace negotiations and has made the prospect of a peaceful resolution virtually impossible.

Through an examination of secondary sources, as well as first-hand accounts from speeches, news reports and official documents, I argue that the current uncompromising support of Israel by the U.S. has led to the demise of any possibility for significant progress to be made. In fact, Trump's refusal to call out Israel and encourage democratic reforms has further isolated us from the international community and has weakened our standing in the free world. If the United States ever hopes to take part in a successful peace plan, we must play an objective role and allow the main parties to discuss their grievances directly. Under President Trump, the region has moved further away from reaching everlasting peace and stability.

Introduction

Trinity College offers students the opportunity to earn college credit through an accelerated, two-week course during winter break. While some of those courses take place on campus, others actually occur abroad, and as a student who had not studied abroad before, this was an exciting opportunity for me. So this past fall, I decided to enroll in a course that would take me to Israel and the Palestinian Territories. This region of the world has always intrigued me and the prospect of going there was enticing. For the past two years, I have been the President of the House of Peace (HOP), the Middle Eastern and North African cultural student organization. Throughout my time with HOP, not only did I discover new knowledge about a culture different from mine, but I became a passionate advocate for peace and human rights in the region we represented. Though the course was considered part of the Religious Studies department (therefore not focused on peace and human rights), I was still promised that we would inevitably be engaging in conversations related to those topics, given its current state of affairs. Entitled “Early Christian Women in Pilgrimage: In the Footsteps of Helena & Egeria”, our course consisted of following in the journeys of these two prominent, early Christians. In partnership with the Albright Institute for Archeological Research (AIAR), we were poised to embark on an intimate journey through history, visiting holy sites and reminiscing on their historical significance. In the months prior to our departure, we met on a weekly basis to go over logistics and expectations for our trip. We were to be explorative but cautious, and deeply cognizant of our surroundings at all times. We also collectively read *The Pilgrimage of Egeria* by Anne McGowan and Paul Bradshaw, to gain some understanding of who these women were and why they are important. All the preparation, as you may imagine, left me eager to immerse myself

into this new environment. I would finally have a study abroad experience that was sure to be transformative.

Then, suddenly, two days before our departure date, I received an email regarding the trip: it was canceled. President Trump, on January 3rd, 2020, had quietly ordered a U.S. drone strike that ultimately killed Iranian General Qasem Soleimani in Iraq. Out of an abundance of caution and fears of potential regional insecurity and violence, the school had to make the swift decision to no longer have the trip. I was overwhelmed with emotions after hearing the news. “Why me?” “Why now?” I would ask myself, attempting to rationalize what I had believed to be irrational. It took me a while to depersonalize his actions and put them into political and historical context. Nevertheless, not only was this devastating news, but it made me angry. I never had the actions of a president impact me in such a direct way. I had invested so much time, energy and money into the trip and was looking forward to having this-once-in-a-lifetime experience.

In light of this, I found it important to write about and document President Trump’s approach to the Middle East region, particularly Israel and the Palestinian Territories. His authoritarian nature has certainly changed the landscape of our country and its relations with the world, and in order to best understand how his actions have truly impacted the state of human rights globally, it is necessary to highlight his approach to one of the most contentious regions today. Through a thematic analysis of primary source documents and news reports, as well as a historical dive into U.S. relations within the region, I raise the question: *How has the United States, under the Trump administration, uniquely failed to uphold human rights rules and norms in the Israeli/Palestinian region?* While I acknowledge that past presidencies may have also been

unsuccessful in maintaining human rights within Israel/Palestine, the Trump era has brought with it an extremely different approach that has ultimately made the prospects of peace virtually impossible.

To further explore this question, I begin chapter one by providing political context into the history of Israeli-Palestine and how we have gotten to where we are today. I then focus on how President Obama handled the conflict in order to shed light on how previous presidents went about addressing the conflict. Chapter two is dedicated to explaining major actions taken by the Trump administration that highlight the ways in which they have deviated from a traditional U.S. foreign policy approach to the Middle East. In doing so, I argue that Trump's hardline, pro-Israel approach to resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has weakened U.S. leadership across the globe. By failing to hold our allies accountable and by neglecting to use our leverage to encourage a peaceful resolution, the U.S. under the Trump administration has failed to uphold international human rights rules and values.

Literature Review

Donald J. Trump, before becoming president, had established himself as a notorious political figure who was unafraid of speaking his mind. Because of this, it was quite clear how he personally felt about a myriad of issues, including the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In an interview with CNN in the spring of 2016, Trump stated that he was, “very pro Israel” and touted the many awards he had received and the money he had donated to the country.¹ He went on to say that he would, “love to be neutral [between Israel and Palestinian],” but that he probably could not be, because Palestine was inflicting too much terror. In his words, “They have to stop with the terror because what they’re doing with the missiles and with the stabbings and with all of the other things that they do, it’s horrible and it’s gotta end”.² As a strong ally to Israel, Trump’s comments did not stray too far from traditional U.S. policy, but still raised some eyebrows. Clearly though, his criticism was towards Palestinians, who are viewed as the sole perpetrators of the violence occurring in the region. Some were surprised by Trump’s ability to sound somewhat inline with the American stance on the issue as he had difficulty devising his position on the Middle East during the campaign. Author Mark Lynch describes the combination of Trump’s policy proposals and rhetoric towards the Middle East as a type of *belligerent minimalism*.³ Similarly, who could forget the infamous day in which candidate Trump called for banning

¹ Mccaskill, Nolan D., and Nick Gass. “Trump Backs Away from 'Neutral' Stance on Israel.” *POLITICO*, 21 Mar. 2016.

² Ibid.

³ Marc Lynch (2016) *Belligerent Minimalism: The Trump Administration and the Middle East*, *The Washington Quarterly*, 39:4, 127-144, DOI: [10.1080/01636660X.2016.1263920](https://doi.org/10.1080/01636660X.2016.1263920)

Muslims from entering into the U.S. At one of his rallies, he announced his position that there should be "a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States until our country's representatives can figure out what the hell is going on".⁴ While not directly implicating any particular state at the time, Islam is the predominant religion in Palestine. In fact, there are nearly 85% of people practicing it in Palestine as a whole, and 99% practicing it in the Gaza Strip.⁵ His unsettling statement drew criticism from political parties and organizations around the world, as fears of such a policy being implemented began to grow. Trump, in this instance utilized a strain of anti-islamic rhetoric that framed Islam as an evil, dark force. His push for extreme measures to be taken, such as a muslim ban, prove scholars point that fear-mongering was a focal tactic used to rally people against the religion itself, rather than those who use religion as a means of terror.⁶

Unfortunately, after Trump was sworn in as president, much of what he had promised as a candidate in regard to Israel-Palestine became a reality. He dropped the Obama administration's approach that called for democratic reforms and avoided overtly favoring one side over the other.⁷ Instead, Trump focused on fostering an even closer relationship with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and showed no interest in bolstering democratic norms. His appointment of staunch supporters of Israel, such as the son of a prominent Long Island rabbi David Friedman to

⁴ Johnson, Jenna. "Trump Calls for 'Total and Complete Shutdown of Muslims Entering the United States'." *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 8 Dec. 2015.

⁵ Palestine Population. (2020-02-17). Retrieved 2020-04-17.

⁶ Shane, Scott, Matthew Rosenberg, and Eric Lipton. "Trump Pushes Dark View of Islam to Center of U.S. Policy-Making." *The New York Times*, February 2, 2017. <https://nyti.ms/2jXsjhb>.

⁷ Thompson, J. (n.d.). *Trump's Middle East Policy*.

ambassador of Israel, and son of Jewish refugees Jason Greenblatt as advisor on Israel, sent a distinct tone of support to Israel.⁸ In a 2017 document that lays out the Trump administration's national security strategy, it becomes clear as to why such a strong bromance was developing among Trump and Netanyahu. The document states that, "Israel is not the cause of the region's problems" and that the only reason peace has not come to the region is because of threats from "jihadist terrorists organizations".⁹ Here, Trump is describing organizations such as Hamas, a Palestinian militant group that has been deemed a terrorists organizations from forces like the U.S. and the European Union. In explicit terms, the U.S. was now relinquishing any responsibility from Israel and placing it all on Palestine. Declarations such as these only emboldened Israel, who could now plead blameless for any current instability.¹⁰ Scholars question whether Trump's actions were influenced by his actual concern for the region or if they were for his personal benefit. His flagrance in regards to Israeli-Palestinian policy showed that reaching an actual peace deal was subordinate to attaining domestic political goals.¹¹

Trump's strategy towards the Middle East has also been described as inimitable and as occurring in a piecemeal fashion because of his inconsistencies and obscurity. In many ways, it seemed as though his policy was to just do the exact opposite of what his predecessor, President

⁸ Nusem, R. (09 May 2018). A Year of Readjustment: The Trump Administration's New Policy on Israel and Iran.

⁹ The White House (2017, December). National Security Strategy of the United States of America.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Eriksson, Bo Jonas Jacob (2018) *Master of none: Trump, Jerusalem, and the prospects of Israeli-Palestinian peace*. Middle East Policy. pp. 51-63. ISSN 1475-4967

Obama, had done in the years before.¹² This change could best be seen in Trump's announcement in 2017 to denote Jerusalem as Israel's capital and move the U.S. embassy to that city. In his speech, he called this decision, "a necessary condition for achieving peace," an ironic statement given the violence that ensued that same day as a response.¹³ The Jerusalem Embassy Act, adopted in 1995, gave this authority to any sitting president who wished to move the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. However, over the last 20 years, presidents had avoided taking this action as it was believed to stifle any prospect of achieving peace in the Middle East.¹⁴ Nonetheless, Trump's decision to declare Jerusalem as the capital of Israel further demonstrated his shameless preference of an Israeli State. Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, in reaction, dubbed Trump's decision as "the slap of the century" and warned that the U.S. could no longer be apart of peace negotiations.¹⁵

Presidents before Trump have attempted to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Other countries and NGOs have also attempted to facilitate a peaceful solution to no avail. Historically, The U.S. has expressed a commitment to a two-state solution plan, one that provides both people their own state.¹⁶ As one of Israel's greatest allies, presidents have tried to use their relationship as leverage to urge a resolution. U.S intervention in the Middle east, which has often come in the

¹² Black, Ian. "Donald Trump and the Middle East." *Political Insight* 9, no. 1 (March 2018): 22–25.

¹³ Al Jazeera. "Trump Transcript in Full: Jerusalem Is Israel's Capital." *Jerusalem News | Al Jazeera*, Al Jazeera, 8 Dec. 2017.

¹⁴ Waxman, Olivia B. "The Law Behind Donald Trump's Jerusalem Embassy Move." *Time*, Time, 5 Dec. 2017.

¹⁵ Black, Ian. "Donald Trump and the Middle East," pgs 22–25.

¹⁶ Quandt, William B. *Peace Process: American Diplomacy and the Arab-Israeli Conflict since 1967*. Brookings Institution Press, 2005.

form of military intervention, has always been to create and preserve a way of life similar to that of America.¹⁷ As the only declared democracy in the region, the U.S. has long viewed Israel as vital to the spread and success of democratic norms. Even so, the region in its entirety continues to face challenges that make this idealization virtually impossible.

The various literature on Donald Trump's rhetoric and actions about Israel-Palestine as well as past presidents' attempts at a peaceful solution is key to point out when attempting to understand America's Middle East strategy today. Overall, the literature demonstrates President Trump's extreme approach to the conflict and helps explain how he has failed to uphold human rights norms and policies within the region.

¹⁷ Bacevich, Andrew J. *America's War for the Greater Middle East: a Military History*. Random House, 2017.

Chapter 1: A History of the Israeli/Palestinian Conflict

Today referred to as Israel and the Palestine territories, this part of the world was originally just called Palestine, named after 12th century Greeks who lived near modern Tel Aviv and Gaza.¹⁸ The idea of Israel as a state began in the 20th century, when tensions between Arabs and Jews were rising. Before this time, Christians, Jews and Muslims lived generally peacefully in close quarters. The heart of this land is home to Jerusalem, the city that is considered holy to the three major Abrahamic religions -- Judaism, Christianity and Islam. In each of their respective holy doctrines, Jerusalem is a significant, holy site and center of pilgrimage. Though minor conflicts did occur amongst these groups in the early 20th century and even beforehand, they were nothing compared to World War II and its implications for the region.

From an Israeli perspective, the most significant event of World War II was the Holocaust.

During the early 1930s in Germany, the Nazi Party, who were unabashedly anti-Semitic, began to increase their power in parliament and Adolf Hitler, who would soon become the totalitarian leader of Germany, was appointed German Chancellor. Throughout this time, Jews were already experiencing fierce discrimination and persecution in Germany. The Nuremberg Laws of 1935, specifically the Law for the Protection of German Blood and German Honour and the Reich Citizenship Law, were blatant racist policies that denied Jewish people in Germany citizenship or livelihoods.¹⁹ Aware of what was soon to come, Jewish people had made several attempts to migrate to other countries, but were denied entry by many. The U.S. only allowed

¹⁸ Rashid Ismail, and Peter Marshall Fraser. "Palestine." *Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 24 Feb. 2020, www.britannica.com/place/Palestine.

¹⁹ National Archives, The Nuremberg Laws. (n.d.).

about 27,000 Jews in 1938 due to existing quota policies, while others did not allow any in. It increasingly became difficult for the Jewish people to find a sanctuary where they would be safe and free from a second-class status. In the following years, the German invasion of Poland would mark the beginning of World War II and the Holocaust. Between 1941 and 1945, over 6 million Jews were murdered at Hitler's direction in what was known as the *Final Solution to the Jewish Question*.²⁰ These horrific acts ended only after Hitler committed suicide and Germany declared defeat.

The quest for a Jewish State had been in the works decades prior to this tragedy, though the Holocaust surely had a decisive influence on its perceived necessity. Jewish people, now more than ever, felt the urgency of an Israeli State. This nationalist movement, also known as Zionism, presented the need for the establishment of a Jewish homeland as a form of repatriation for the prosecution of the Jewish people.²¹ Moreover, the new nation would be developed on *The Promise Land*, land that was promised to the progenitor Abraham by God, according to the Torah. Within the holy text, it states in Hebrew, "Take possession of the land and settle in it, for I have given you the land to possess".²² This verse is the source for the biblical command to settle and inhabit the Land of Israel. So not only did the Jewish people feel the need for an Israeli state because of repression, but based on biblical reasoning as well. At this time, Palestinians, who were mostly Arab, occupied this land. During World War II, there was an influx of Jewish people who had illegally settled in Palestine, but nonetheless only accounted for a small segment of the

²⁰ Wistrich, Robert S. "Israel and the Holocaust Trauma." *Jewish History*, vol. 11, no. 2, 1997, pp. 13–20.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *The Torah*, numbers 33:53.

population. A plan for the creation of an Jewish State actually came from Great Britain, who after seizing the Ottoman Empire in World War I, issued the Balfour Declaration that stated their intent to develop a Jewish State in Palestine.²³ Strong Arab opposition to this plan delayed it's implementation up until the end of World War II. With the British mandate over Palestine about to expire, a decision on what to do with the land had to be made. Unable to develop a plan that would appease both the Jewish and Arab people, the British handed over the mandate to the United Nations (UN), who ultimately decided to partition the land and affirm the creation of the State of Israel in 1948.²⁴

The declaration of an Israeli State led to what is known today as the Arab-Israeli War of 1948. Surrounding Arab forces from Iraq, Egypt, Jordan and Syria entered the territory and attacked the Israeli army in an attempt to prevent them from settling in Palestine. The Palestinian Arabs refused to give up their land and believed the UN process to be favorable to only the Jewish people. After nearly a year of combat and thousands of lives lost, separate armistice agreements between Israel and each of the Arab states eventually ended the war.²⁵ The Jewish people came out victorious, gaining the land granted to them by the UN as well as additional land won through the conflict. They now occupied more land than the Palestinian Arabs who were already living there. To this day, both the Jewish and Arab people perceive the outcome of

²³ Wistrich, "Israel and the Holocaust Trauma", pp. 13-20.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Office of the Historian, Foreign Service Institute. The Arab-Israeli War of 1948. (n.d.). Retrieved April 20, 2020, from <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/arab-israeli-war>

the war in different ways. While it is celebrated by Jews each year as the Israeli War of Independence, it is mourned by Palestinians as the beginning of *Nakba*.²⁶

Displaced Palestinians now had to manage a new way of life under Israeli rule while others were expelled from their homes entirely. Over the next several decades, the Israeli and Arab communities would continue to engage in conflict. The Six-Day War of 1967 was an attempt by Arab forces to regain control of land as relations between Israel and the Arab states had not been fully normalized.²⁷ Once again, Israeli forces came out victorious, successfully defeating the Arab military and gaining control of even more land in historic Palestine. As Israeli nationalism and pride were gaining strength, so were Arab resentment and hostility. Palestinians who now lived under Israeli rule were dealing with retaliatory repression and discrimination. Rising unemployment and poor living conditions made life for Palestinians in Israel-occupied territory difficult. Tired of their treatment under Israeli rule, in 1987 the first Intifada broke out.²⁸ It was characterized by mass protests and often violent riots, and it was a sign that relations between the two groups were still contentious. The grassroots uprising of the Palestinians eventually developed into the Unified National Command of the Uprising, which played a crucial role in organizing the Palestinian people during this time. At the same time came the rise of Hamas (the arabic acronym for the Islamic Resistance Movement), a militant organization

²⁶ *U.S. Department of State*, U.S. Department of State, history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/arab-israeli-war.

²⁷ Nami Nasrallah, 'The First and Second Palestinian intifadas,' in David Newman, Joel Peters (eds.) *Routledge Handbook on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, Routledge, 2013, pp. 56–68.

²⁸ *Ibid*.

with the goal of liberating Palestine from the Israeli people.²⁹ It has been designated as a terrorist organization by the U.S. and European forces because of their commitment to the destruction of Israel through armed conflict. While not representative of the Palestinian people as a whole, the creation of Hamas speaks to the deep frustration and bitterness many Palestinians still held as a result of being overtaken. A second Intifada would eventually occur again in the year 2000 as a result of the failed Oslo peace process.³⁰ The Israeli army once again faced off against unarmed civilians enraged by the occupation of their land and their second-class treatment. Many on both sides saw this second breakout as the official abandonment of a peaceful resolution. With every attempt by the Palestinians to seek retribution, Israeli forces increased security and hostility of those living in their declared state.

As a result of the second Intifada and what seemed to be relentless rioting on the part of Palestinians, in 2003 Israel developed a 25-foot wall separating the West Bank and Israeli-occupied territory. Known as the West Bank Barrier, Israel defended its buildout as a necessary step to ensuring Palestinians “terrorists” do not retaliate against their civilians.³¹ However, Palestinians consider it a modern day example of Apartheid. This view is shared by the UN International Court of Justice, who issued an opinion calling the barrier a violation of international law.³² The UN General Assembly concurred with the opinion and agreed that the

²⁹ Ibid, pg 57.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Cohen, Shaul E. “Israel's West Bank Barrier: An Impediment to Peace?” *Geographical Review*, vol. 96, no. 4, 2006, pp. 682–695., www.jstor.org/stable/30034143. Accessed 13 2020.

³² Ibid.

wall should be removed in a 144-4 vote, 12 abstentions.³³ Regardless, Israel has made minimal changes to the wall, only rerouting it under the guise of minimizing its negative effects on the Palestinians. The wall lives on to this day and has presented to be an impediment to a peace agreement.

The current state of Israel and the Palestinian territories is unsustainable and is a disaster waiting to happen. U.S. intervention has yet to successfully bring about change in the region, but as a country that views itself as an exceptional leader of the free world, it's not a matter of *if* we should intervene, but *how*. Our long-standing relationship with Israel also prompts us to support our democratic ally while also holding them accountable for their actions. But with Palestinians living in occupied territory and both Israeli and Palestinian people being killed everyday, we can not let the mirage of an ideal democratic nation in the Middle East allow us to ignore the realities on the ground. The intense animosity between both people requires steady U.S. leadership that, at minimal, attempts to uphold human rights norms and values. In order to demonstrate how President Trump has uniquely failed at this task, it's necessary that we compare his approach to that of his predecessors.

³³ “General Assembly adopts text requesting international court of justice to issue advisory opinion on the West Bank Separation Wall | Meetings Coverage and Press Releases.” *United Nations*, United Nations.

Israeli-Palestinian Conflict under Obama

President Barack Obama's Middle East plan followed a similar playbook taken by presidents before him. He first laid out his Middle East aspirations in an address given in Cairo, Egypt in 2009. Entitled *A New Beginning*, Obama addressed his support of a two-state solution in which both Israeli's and Palestinians have their own statehood.³⁴ While support for a two-state solution followed longstanding U.S. policy, the tone and rhetoric of his speech as a whole was widely regarded as the most sympathetic a U.S. president had been towards Palestinians. Obama recognized the plight of the Palestinian people, and made the commitment that, "America [would] not turn our backs on the legitimate Palestinian aspiration for dignity, opportunity, and a state of their own."³⁵ Obama had also called for a cessation of the Israeli settlements, a pushback on Israel's claim that its presence is necessary to prevent civilian deaths. This sentiment was made clear when in that same speech, he said that it's construction, "Violates previous agreements and undermines efforts to achieve peace. It is time for these settlements to stop."³⁶ Here, Obama recognized that not only was the current situation stifling the peace process, but he also declared it as a violation of international consensus. The international community regards Israeli settlements as illegal and comparable to a war crime as it is in violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention (GCIV). Article 49 of the GCIV specifically states that, "The Occupying

³⁴ "Remarks by the President at Cairo University, 6-04-09." National Archives and Records Administration. National Archives and Records Administration.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

Power shall not deport or transfer parts of its own civilian population into the territory it occupies.”³⁷ Yet, this describes the current situation in the region. In this sense, President Obama upheld human rights by calling out an ally’s wrongdoing. The importance of U.S. pressure was personified when, a few months later, Prime Minister Netanyahu announced for the first time his endorsement of Palestinian statehood alongside Israel. He also conceded to postponing further development of the settlements, an urgent matter for Palestinians living in the region.³⁸ President Trump on the other hand, has not only failed to denounce the Israeli wall, but has embraced it, often praising its effectiveness in an attempt to promote his own idea of a border wall between Mexico and the U.S. During the 2018 U.S. government shut down over border security, Trump invoked Israel’s wall in a meeting with Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer. He said, “If you really want to find out how effective a wall is, just ask Israel...[It’s] 99.9 percent effective and our wall will be every bit as good as that, if not better.”³⁹ Trump’s public support for Israel’s wall is not only oppositional to the previous administration's position , but it completely disregards what the international community has already agreed upon.

In 2011, though, Obama seemed to backtrack a bit with a vote made at the United Nations Security Council. U.S. Ambassador to the UN Susan Rice decided to veto a resolution condemning Israeli settlement activity. Rice explained that her objection to the resolution was

³⁷ The Geneva Conventions of August 12, 1949, International Committee of the Red Cross, Geneva, pp.153-221.

³⁸ Kershner, Isabel. “Netanyahu Backs Palestinian State, With Caveats.” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 14 June 2009.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

not because of its substance, but because of its potential to hinder peace negotiations.⁴⁰ Though she tried hard to justify her reasoning for this decision, it proved that the administration's mere rhetoric would not be supported through action. It also highlighted how strong our allyship is with Israel and how it can often make the U.S. reluctant to critique them, even when we know they are wrong. It surely was a missed opportunity to denounce Israel's settlement walls through an international means.

During his second term, Obama continued his efforts to maintain close negotiations between the two parties. In 2013, he appointed new Secretary of State John Kerry to carry on with the peace process. Instead of meeting with their leaders, this time talks were had between their respective top negotiators.⁴¹ Palestinians were only willing to come back to the table after Israeli's agreed to release 104 prisoners who were seen as freedom fighters to the Palestinian cause.⁴² This was viewed as a substantial concession and a win for the U.S as it demonstrated a willingness to compromise. Unfortunately, before real progress could be made, Palestinians quit discussions due to continued settlement building by Israel. Secretary Kerry tried relentlessly to salvage peace talks, but it quickly became clear that he would be unable to do so. Throughout 2014, Israel continued to announce the development of new settlements throughout the land, and Palestinians viewed this as a sign that Israel was no longer willing to negotiate. There also still were debates on where to draw border lines and what exactly would be required to achieve state

⁴⁰ Pressman, J. (2016, July 14). Obama and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict. Retrieved April 20, 2020, from <https://www.e-ir.info/2016/07/14/obama-and-the-israeli-palestinian-conflict/>

⁴¹ Booth, William (29 July 2013). "Peace talks set to begin after Israel agrees to free 104 Palestinian prisoners". *The Washington Post*.

⁴² Ibid.

recognition. In a last stitch effort at achieving peace, Secretary of State John Kerry made a speech at the Saban Forum warning that ,”unless significant efforts are made to change the dynamic—and I mean significant—it will only bring more violence, more heartbreak, and more despair.”⁴³

With no progress in sight, It was at this point that President Obama realized he would not be able to solve the ongoing Middle East conflict. In lieu of this reality, Obama made a bold move at the United Nations Security Council. In his last act as president, he had US Ambassador to the UN Samantha Powers to abstain on the controversial resolution that again demanded an end to Israeli settlements on Palestinian territory.⁴⁴ Specifically, it stated that Israel “immediately and completely cease all settlement activities in the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem,” and declares that the establishment of settlements by Israel has “no legal validity and constitutes a flagrant violation under international law.”⁴⁵For decades, the U.S. had reliably voted to veto the resolution as it was always intended to strongly rebuke the Israel government, our ally. But for the first time ever, rather than veto and show support to them, the U.S. moved out of the way and allowed for the censure of Israel by the international community. It is important to note that in explaining her vote, Powers tried to walk back the implications of her vote and said that it “does not in any way diminish our steadfast and unparalleled commitment to the

⁴³ Ya’alon, Moshe, Yair Lapid, John Kerry, Martin S. Indyk, and Hillary Rodham Clinton. “Saban Forum 2015-Israel and the United States: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow.” Brookings. Brookings, August 12, 2016.

⁴⁴ Stanglin, Doug. “U.S. Abstains on U.N. Vote Condemning Israeli Settlements.” USA Today. Gannett Satellite Information Network, December 24, 2016. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2016/12/23/un-set-vote-israeli-settlement-despite-trump-intervention/95796716/>.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

security of Israel" and acknowledged that Israel "faces very serious threats in a very tough neighborhood."⁴⁶

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

Chapter 2: Israeli-Palestinian Conflict under Trump

As touched upon in the beginning, the election of Donald Trump brought with it a drastic change in U.S policy towards the Middle East. The U.S. always shared a friendly relationship with Israel, but Donald Trump will be remembered for his uniquely close friendship with Israel and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Before becoming president, Trump had regularly boasted about the many awards he had received from the country. But during the 2016 campaign he struggled to maintain the pro-Israel tone he has become known for. For example, at a town hall event in February of 2016, Trump stated that he planned on being “sort of a neutral guy” on peace negotiations between Israel and Palestine.⁴⁷ His impartiality in this instance concerned some Jewish leaders who had expected a stronger response of support from Trump. He continued these slip ups when he said in an interview with the Associated Press that in regard to peace in the Middle East, “a lot will have to do with Israel and whether or not Israel wants to make the deal – whether or not Israel’s willing to sacrifice certain things.”⁴⁸ His attempt to place complete responsibility on Israel further isolated him from his Republican counterparts who were staunchly pro-Israel. But as the campaign winded down, and Trump became the presumptive republican nominee, he began to strike a different tone. At the annual American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) meeting in 2016, Trump conceded to making some brash comments in a prepared speech by his son-in law Jared Kushner. He called President Obama “the worst thing to ever happen to Israel” and promised that the U.S. would “move the American embassy

⁴⁷ Schaefer, Brian. “Where Does Donald Trump Stand on Israel?” haaretz.com, April 10, 2018.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

to the eternal capital of the Jewish people.”⁴⁹ After this moment, Trump would go on to develop an unnatural support for Israel that will go down in American history as the most supportive a U.S. president has been towards the Jewish State.

This change could be seen almost immediately after his inauguration, with Trump’s announcement in 2017 to denote Jerusalem as Israel’s capital and move the U.S. embassy to that city. In his speech, he called this decision, “a necessary condition for achieving peace”, an ironic statement given the violence that ensued that same day in response.⁵⁰ The Jerusalem Embassy Act, adopted in 1995, gave this authority to any sitting president who wished to move the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.⁵¹ However, over the last 20 years, presidents had avoided taking this action as it was believed to stifle any prospect of achieving peace in the Middle East.⁵² Nonetheless, Trump’s decision to declare Jerusalem as the capital of Israel further demonstrated his shameless preference of an Israeli State. He tried to tout this move as simply recognizing the obvious, but clearly there were further implications of this announcement. Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, in reaction, dubbed Trump’s decision as “the slap of the century” and warned that the U.S could no longer be apart of peace negotiations.⁵³ Though he was keeping a campaign promise, this decision was not contributing to lasting peace and stability. In fact, it was rejected by a majority of world leaders. The United Nations Security

⁴⁹ Begley, Sarah. “Read Donald Trump's Full Speech to AIPAC.” Time. Time, March 22, 2016.

⁵⁰ Al Jazeera. “Trump Transcript in Full: Jerusalem Is Israel's Capital.”

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Waxman. “The Law Behind Donald Trump's Jerusalem Embassy Move.”

⁵³ Black. “Donald Trump and the Middle East,” pg. 22–25.

Council held an emergency meeting the following day and 14 out of 15 members condemned Trump's decision.⁵⁴

The following year, the administration continued to put its biases into policy when they began to dismantle support for Palestine monetarily. The U.S. State Department abruptly decided to end all funding to the U.N. Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), the single largest organization dedicated to supporting Palestinian refugees.⁵⁵ Before this, the U.S. had been the main contributor to the organization. In conjunction with this cut in funding, the U.S. also reprogrammed hundreds of millions of dollars in economic aid originally set for the West Bank and Gaza to other locations, yielding an economic blow to Palestinians already in distress.⁵⁶ This money was going to U.S. funded projects like schools and hospitals, and other programs aimed at working towards peace in areas of conflict. Projects that were set to begin had to now be suspended as there was no longer sufficient money to fund them. The Trump administration tried to argue that these decisions were made in an attempt to bring Palestine back to the negotiating table, but punishing the Palestinians was ineffective. These cuts went against longstanding U.S. assistance to Palestinians, who since 1994 has received over 5 billion dollars in U.S. aid.⁵⁷ It has been a key part of U.S. policy to encourage an Israeli-Palestinian peace process and improve life in the West Bank and Gaza.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Fassihi, Farnaz (December 9, 2017). "Fourteen of 15 Security Council Members Denounce U.S. Stance on Jerusalem". Wall Street Journal. ISSN 0099-9660. Retrieved December 9, 2017.

⁵⁵ "Congressional Research Service." Product Details RS22967. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/details?prodcode=RS22967>.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

In 2019, Trump broke with international law again when he signed a proclamation recognizing Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights. The Golan Heights have been a contested area in the region for over half a century as it is long recognized as part of Syria. Since the Six-Day War of 1967, the international community has viewed the land as Syrian territory occupied by Israel in war.⁵⁹ While Israel had claimed sovereignty over the land, no other country had shared this view: until now. This decision violated the United Nations Security Council Resolution 497 of 1981, which was signed unanimously, and called the Israeli annexation of the Golan Heights “null and void and without international legal effect.”⁶⁰ UN Secretary-General António Guterres later that day affirmed, “that the status of Golan has not changed,” and that the decision made by the U.S. goes against long standing principles of territorial integrity.⁶¹ Not only did the U.S. break with the international community, but the U.S. made unnecessary concessions to Israel without leveraging its power to promote stability in the region. It was also seen as a move just to help Prime Minister Netanyahu in his campaign for reelection back in Israel.⁶²

Later that year, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo released a statement saying that the U.S. disagreed with a State Department opinion of 1981 that rendered Israeli settlements as against international law.⁶³ This declaration represented a drastic U.S. reversal on long standing legal

⁵⁹ Sune Engel Rasmussen, “Trump’s Golan Heights Endorsement Draws Ire From Friends and Foes,” *Wall Street Journal*, (March 22, 2019);

⁶⁰ “Proclamation on Recognizing the Golan Heights as Part of the State of Israel.” The White House. The United States Government.

⁶¹ Nichols, Michelle. “U.N. Chief Clear That Golan Status Has Not Changed: Spokesman.” *Reuters*, Thomson Reuters, 25 Mar. 2019,

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ “Secretary Michael R. Pompeo Remarks to the Press.” U.S. Department of State. U.S. Department of State, November 18, 2019.

opinion that labeled these settlements as otherwise. To justify his reversal, he cited former President Ronald Reagan, who assessed that the settlements were not "inherently illegal," but merely "unnecessarily provocative."⁶⁴ Again, almost deliberately, the Trump administration went out of its way to accommodate Israel's illegal behaviors. The announcement sent a clear message to Israeli settlers and its government: continue settlement building. Netanyahu praised this statement, calling it proof "that the Jewish people are not foreign colonialists", a belief that Palestinians hold deeply to be true.⁶⁵ The announcement also stands to be a renunciation of the Fourth Geneva Convention, which outlaws transfers of population by an occupying power.⁶⁶ At the start of this year, Trump released his long awaited Israeli-Palestinian Peace Plan. Led by son-in-law and senior advisor Jared Kushner, this plan outlined the administration's hopes for the Middle East region. Many were skeptical and questioned the relevance of Kushner's part in these efforts due to his lack of expertise on the issue; his presence was clearly a result of nepotism. Regardless, the Trump-Kushner plan precisely reflected the administration's stance on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict throughout his first term: to favor Israel while maintaining a overtly critical view of Palestine. The overall plan was divided into two parts, one economic and the other political, and together they made up the administration's attempt at reconciling the conflict. On January 28th 2020, Trump officially unveiled the political peace plan with Netanyahu standing beside him. Palestinians leaders were not invited to the event. Months prior, Trump had

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Gonzales, Richard. "State Department Loosens U.S. Policy On Israeli Settlements In West Bank." State Department Loosens U.S. Policy On Israeli Settlements In West Bank | WBUR News. WBUR, November 18, 2019.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

released the economic portion of his plan in a speech given in Bahrain. This event was boycotted by many Palestinian leaders and businessmen who viewed this effort as an attempt to buy away Palestinian territory.⁶⁷ Officials in the Palestinian Authority (PA) officials also rejected the idea of economic incentives influencing their positions on core political demands. The political plan has proven to be even worse, as it made drastic changes to previous U.S. peace plans. For one, it gave Israel almost full autonomy over Jerusalem. As explained early on, Jerusalem has long been a shared city with holy and historical significance to many people. To submit the entire area to the Jewish people demonstrates carelessness and a lack of legitimate efforts by the U.S. to reach peace. The plan also redraws the border lines that were released in 1967 and gives significantly more land to Israel.⁶⁸ Since recognition of Israel as a state in 1948, Palestinians have been losing more and more of their land over the decades. To think that Palestinians would accept even less than what they already have is shameful and should not have even been on the table. The Trump administration's actions thus far have only bolstered Israel at the expense of real and legitimate progress towards peace. At every turn, Trump has seemingly held the most pro-Israel position possible, divesting from Palestinian related causes while significantly increasing support to Israel. Whether or not Trump was acting upon deeply held convictions or there were other motivations, his actions surely were not taken with the intent of bringing about positive change.

⁶⁷Al Jazeera. "Palestinians Reject Economic Part of US Peace Plan." Israel News | Al Jazeera. Al Jazeera, June 23, 2019.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

Conclusion: Implications for the future of Peace and Human Rights

Though it was my personal experience that served as the impetus for this paper, the reality of the experiences of those on the ground are worthy of sharing on their own merit. Both the Israel and Palestinian people have been living in fear for many decades, and various countries have tried to assist in their peace process. The U.S. has historically played a significant role in each attempt at a deal, but has failed to lead negotiations down a long lasting, successful path. The policies and rhetoric of President Trump have further irritated an already fragile conflict, making the prospect of a viable plan nonexistent. As President Trump's first term comes to a close, we can already see how his presidency will have long lasting implications for the world. When it comes to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in particular, the U.S. has lost the credibility and leadership needed to effectively bring about positive change to the region. His totalitarian tendencies, along with his unyielding support for Israel regardless of their actions, has disqualified the U.S from continuing to play a role in peace negotiations. This reality is unfortunate because for so long we have championed human rights and tried to set an example for the world. American exceptionalism made us the envy of the world. But now that we have relinquished this role, what is to come of peace and human rights within the Israeli-Palestinian region?

The future looks bleak, but it is important to maintain a hopeful outlook. If Donald Trump goes on to win the 2020 election and secure a second term, there are fears that the prospect of a Palestinian State will never come to fruition. The U.S. has cozied up to Israel to the point where Palestinians will no longer even come to the negotiating table. Who is to blame them? From recognizing Jerusalem as the official capital of Israel, to no longer recognizing

Israeli settlements as illegal, the plight of the Palestinian people has been completely ignored. As long as President Trump remains in office, there will be no viable solution to the conflict anytime soon.

Joe Biden, the presumptive democratic nominee for president and former vice president of the U.S. under Obama, should bring some hope to the Palestinian cause. According to his campaign, if he becomes president, Biden plans to “reverse the Trump Administration’s destructive cutoff of diplomatic ties with the Palestinian Authority and cancelation of assistance programs that support Israeli-Palestinian security cooperation, economic development, and humanitarian aid for the Palestinian people in the West Bank and Gaza.”⁶⁹ Retracting many of the Trump era policies regarding the conflict will be an important first step, but it will not be enough. If the U.S. wants to continue to be a part of the peace process, we must stop picking sides and start prioritizing the lives and livelihoods of the people. We must be unafraid to call out enemies and allies alike, and always uphold human rights wherever they are violated. At the end of the day, peace will not be determined by the will of America. It will be based on the willingness and ability of the Israeli and Palestinian to come together and develop a resolution. It is my hope, that in the near future, we will see a two-state solution that creates an Israeli State, a Palestinian State, and a lifelong commitment to building and sustaining peace, stability and human rights.

⁶⁹ “Joe Biden and the Jewish Community: A Record and a Plan of Friendship, Support and Action .” Joe Biden for President.

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