American Jews and the Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process: A Study of Diaspora in International Affairs

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Introduction

In much of the Western world until recently, nationalism entailed efforts at erasing vestiges of diaspora-homeland ties or, as Ernest Gellner suggests, nationalism entailed conscious efforts by political elites to foster cultural homogeneity (Gellner, 1994; 2006). Diasporas were the antithesis of nationalism. As Bordes-Benayoun (2010: 48–49) puts it, “belonging to a diaspora . . . used to inspire suspicion and rejection on the part of host societies. It appeared as a threat to the recently-built nation . . . More than any other foreigners, members of the diaspora were suspected of disloyalty towards their host country.” Until the latter decades of the twentieth century, elite opinion held that ethnicity ought not be a factor in American politics. Americans should be politically active and vote on the basis of what is in America’s interest or the entire community’s interest, it was asserted, and not on the basis of narrow and insular ethnic interests. One of the more extreme and explicit expressions of this view is the assertion by Theodore Roosevelt, in a speech given on 31 May 1916, that,

I stand for straight Americanism unconditioned and unqualified, and I stand against every form of hyphenated Americanism. I do not speak of the hyphen when it is employed as a mere matter of convenience, although personally I like to avoid its use even in such manner. I speak of and condemn its use whenever it represents an effort to form political parties along racial lines or to bring pressure to bear on parties and politicians, not for American purposes, but in the interest of some group of voters of a certain national origin, or of the country from which they or their fathers came. (The New York Times, 1916)

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In reality, however, ethnicity has long played an important role in American politics. “Balancing the ticket” was one major manifestation of politicians’ awareness of its significance. As Thomas Sowell (1981) points out, engagement in ethnic politics varied among ethnic groups, and he surveys the deep impact of Irish politics. Eastern European Jews, on the other hand, were slower in having an impact on American politics. In fact, until the 1960s, almost anytime public mention was made of “Jewish politics,” American Jewish defense organizations would publicly deny that Jews vote on the basis of religion or ethnicity. American Jews/Jewish Americans vote for what is good for America, they protested, not on the basis of “narrow” ethnic or religious interests. Historically, the major focus of ethnic politics was in the domestic arena, in the interests of ethnic groups in America. Ethnic efforts to impact foreign policy were viewed with much more suspicion and disdain. Those who engaged in it were frequently accused of “dual loyalty,” that was viewed as close to treason. Much of this changed after the 1960s. By the middle of the following decade, Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan pointed to the primary role of ethnicity in foreign policy. As they put it,

Without too much exaggeration it could be stated that the immigration process is the single most important determinant of American foreign policy. This process regulates the ethnic composition of the American electorate. Foreign policy responds to that ethnic composition…It responds to other things as well, but probably first of all to the primal facts of ethnicity (Glazer & Moynihan, 1975: 23–24).

Complex as the diaspora experience may be for the diasporans themselves (Sheffer, 2003), diasporas may have an impact not only on the politics of the host country but also upon the domestic and foreign policies of their homelands, when the homelands are attentive to the voices of those who reside outside the homeland. As players in a conflict situation, those in the diaspora may be supportive of or opposed to a peace process. Diasporas, as a rule, support the homeland’s struggle against neighboring states (Shain, 2007). For those entities that have not yet achieved statehood, diasporas are frequently active in the struggle to arrive at this goal. To the extent that they have sufficient political and economic power, they can play an important role in the decision-making of their homeland with respect to continuing the struggle or moderating it. Homeland politicians will consider the attitudes of their diaspora fellows from different parts of the political spectrum within the context of internal domestic debates. At times, homeland leaders will define the activity within the context of connectedness rather than security and, in the case of opposition leaders, will invite both support for the homeland as well as