

U.S. Foreign Assistance Priorities -- and Israel

The level of U.S. assistance to Israel has finally been placed on the national political agenda. Between 1977 and 1989, Israel and Egypt accounted for 47 percent of all U.S. bilateral assistance, and Israel's portion alone -- for a nation of 4.2 million people -- was 27 percent of the total. The priorities of the U.S. foreign assistance program are highly problematic and the aid to Israel is the most extreme example of their irrationality.

If economic need were considered a prime criteria for receiving aid, Israel should scarcely get any aid at all. Its population is 8 percent of Egypt's (at 53 million), half of one percent of India's (at 800 million) and .8 of one percent of all of sub-Saharan Africa (with a population of half a billion people). India, Egypt and the sub-Saharan region are additionally orders of magnitude in greater need of economic assistance than is Israel.

If one turns to the ten countries that are the highest recipients of U.S. bilateral assistance, they are in order, Israel, Egypt, Turkey, Pakistan, Greece, El Salvador, the Philippines, Spain, India and South Korea. The Philippines would qualify under criteria of need, but aid to Greece, Turkey, Spain and additionally to Portugal as well as the Philippines are essentially payments for U.S. military base rights in those countries. Those sums should come from the budget of the U.S. Department of Defense and should not compete with "assistance" for the entire developing world, as well as Eastern Europe. Spain and South Korea no longer receive significant amounts of U.S. assistance, however none of the countries that are being provided assistance in exchange for military basing rights -- and certainly not Israel -- should be competing for U.S. assistance against developing nations. It is clear that U.S. bilateral assistance is presently allotted precisely for particular political reasons, but it is time that that situation was altered.

There is then the question of the relation of U.S. assistance to Israel and the issues of war and peace in the Middle East. On January 17, the spokeswoman of the U.S. Department of States said, "We do not think that building settlements or putting even more settlers in the [Israeli occupied] territories promotes the cause of peace. We do not

provide U.S. government resources or funds for settlement of new immigrants in the occupied territories." In fact, it is exactly the provision of U.S. government resources and funds that permits Israel to maintain all its policies, West Bank settlements included.

The one thing which has permitted Israel the luxury of obduracy for at least 22 years -- since 1967 in particular -- is the degree of financial support that it obtains from the United States. Without that, both the magnitude of Israel's defense effort and its general foreign policy in the region would be inconceivable. Recent U.S. administrations acquiesced to the Israeli bombing of Iraq's nuclear power reactor in 1981, in which Israel used U.S.-supplied aircraft and bombs in contravention of the controlling U.S. legislation, and the 1982 invasion of Lebanon. Additional U.S. financial support was provided for major Israeli weapon development programs such as direct subsidies for the now-cancelled Lavi tactical aircraft in the early 1980s and the anti-tactical ballistic missile program.

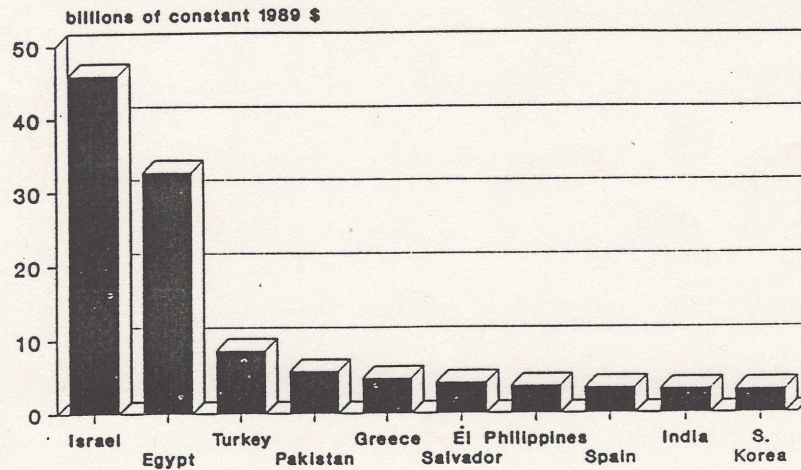
Israel's refusal to make peace heretofore on anything but its own terms is the essential source of the arms race in the Middle East, including the proliferation of ballistic missiles in the area. It is U.S. funding which permits Israel to maintain that policy.

There is the additional silent charade in which U.S. economic and military assistance legislation for the past dozen years has danced around the fact of Israel's development and possession of nuclear weapons. If the criteria regarding this issue existing in other U.S. legislation were rigorously applied to Israel, Israel would not have obtained any bilateral U.S. assistance at all in the past dozen years.

All of these considerations together indicate that U.S. assistance to Israel should not be cut by 5 percent, but that such assistance should rather be a small fraction of what it presently is. One also hears comments in Congress at times to the effect that the entire annual U.S. foreign assistance package is hostage to the portion that is appropriated for Israel, and that were it not for that, U.S. foreign assistance legislation would not pass at all. If that is the case, U.S. foreign aid policy is bankrupt, and both Congress and a number of administrations bear the responsibility for it.

Milton Leitenberg

Figure 4
Major Recipients of U.S. Aid
FY 1977 - FY 1989



FY88 - est. FY89 - req.

Source: Background Materials on Foreign Assistance,
Report of the Task Force on Foreign Assistance,
Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives,
February 1989, p. 163.