

Israel-Palestine: Leslie Gelb's unconventional wisdom

By [Jim Miles](#)

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In its Fortieth Anniversary special issue, Foreign Policy magazine (now owned by the Washington Post) presents a series of articles titled "Unconventional Wisdom." According to the editors letter, Foreign Policy endeavours "to keep alive" the "relentless determination to resist the uncritical thinking of the foreign-policy herd." The editor states that this issue is a tribute to "the smart, reasoned, and pull-no-punches debate these articles represent."

Most of the "unconventional wisdom," when juxtaposed with much of the information available away from the mainstream media of corporate U.S.A., is quite ordinary and not all that unconventional. 'Conventional' is given the meaning of not natural, not spontaneous, following tradition. In that light, is it unconventional to say growth cannot last forever? Not really, that has been postulated for many decades if not centuries. Remember Malthus? He is coming back with a vengeance. Is it unconventional to say the "rich really don't care about the poor?" Hardly, that is as old as human states and empires. Some of the other essays on China and security would certainly go against the conventional wisdom of the Glen Becks and Bill O'Reillys of the world, but for anyone who follows non-mainstream media, there is much conventional wisdom that passes here for unconventional.

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A few of the articles make presentations that while theoretically debunking conventional wisdom, simply continue the conventional mythology as the U.S. wishes to see it. Leslie Gelb, president Emeritus of the Council of Foreign Relations, and from reading his bibliography well out on the right wing of U.S. foreign policy, believes he is providing some unconventional wisdom when arguing "America Pressures Israel Plenty." If that were true, it would be unconventional, but there is nothing in his essay to support his thesis. He postulates two pieces of 'conventional' wisdom - really only one, each representing a side of the same coin - that the Israelis are the main stumbling block to Middle East peace, and not the Palestinians; and that the U.S. has failed to use its influence to pressure Israel for serious compromises. From that Gelb attempts to say the opposite, that the U.S. has pressured Israel a lot. In this case it is truly unconventional as it is essentially not true.

Gelb argues that Israel has "a long and compelling history of making major concessions to Arabs." He describes the return of the Sinai Peninsula to Egypt as "booty of war" that was returned to Egypt in "an act of territorial generosity unprecedented in modern history." The withdrawal was only one part of an overall agreement that saw both sides accepting collective parameters of peace and was a necessary part of any negotiations towards peace. It was not a gift, not a concession, not a generosity, but very much a part of the overall peace process as witnessed by UN Security Council Resolution 242:

1. Affirms that the fulfillment of Charter principles requires the establishment of a just and lasting peace in the Middle East should include the application of both the following principles:

(i) Withdrawal of Israel armed forces from territories occupied in the recent conflict;

(ii) Termination of all claims or states of belligerency and respect for and acknowledgement of the sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence of every State in the area and their right to live in peace within secure and recognized boundaries free from threats or acts of force;

That Israel gained largely from it is unarguable – a safe western boundary guaranteed by U.S. military and economic support to both parties, allowing the Israelis to concentrate their military to the east and north. Three years later Israel occupied southern Lebanon and stayed for twenty years before leaving – in perhaps another move of “unprecedented territorial generosity?”

The argument then turns to some simple phrases that without context are meaningless. The first is “Israelis negotiated with Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat, whom they rightly considered a terrorist.” Is this supposed to demonstrate U.S. pressure? And if so, how? The British negotiated with the IRA, and they negotiated with the ANC, both known terrorist groups. The U.S. has negotiated with the Taliban, and indirectly supports the Mujahadeen-e-Khalq of Iran whom they label as terrorists. The U.S. has supported anti-Castro terrorists, in particular Orlando Bosch, who performed the 1976 mid-air bombing of a Cubana Airlines flight killing 73 people, and is in U.S. territory in spite of Bush’s warning against those who harbour terrorists. Essentially, the U.S. and Israel will negotiate with whomever they feel they can reach some advantage with for resource, political, and financial control.

Then there are more concessions to the Palestinians. Gelb argues that Israel offered “more than ninety per cent of the West Bank” to the Palestinians. How wonderful! Especially considering that the Palestinians originally occupied one hundred per cent of it. Even more, the Palestinians occupied one hundred per cent of the Palestinian Mandate before the British packed up and left. The UN partition plan offered the Palestinians forty-four per cent of the territory – how generous, how unprecedented! The Israelis conquered another-twenty four per cent in the 1948 nakba, then occupied the rest in the 1967 war. How generous, how unprecedented of them to offer the Palestinians what amounts to about eighteen per cent of their original homeland.

According to Gelb, this offer was then upped with “a sliver of Arab East Jerusalem” – their own land again – a “land link to Gaza” and a limited right of return. By this time the Palestinians had grown wary of the U.S. led Israeli ‘negotiations’ and without anything in writing and no real commitments, the deal collapsed.

“In return the Israelis received little,” except for everything they already controlled against the rule of international law for both occupied territories and human rights. After a brief presentation about the arguments of both sides for “further concessions”, Gelb states that the Palestinians do not “acknowledge that when Israel departed Gaza in 2005, it uprooted 9,000 Israeli settlers.” What is there it acknowledge...it is a known fact, obviously recognized by both sides. Although not argued here as a “generous concession” as it has been elsewhere, the move was a combination of political ploy to represent itself to the

western media as a move for peace, while at the same time allowing the ongoing settlements in the West Bank to proceed. The overall result was the imprisonment of all of Gaza and complete control of all movement of people and resources.

In the next statement he argues, "Israel got rockets and a terrorist enclave run by Hamas." True, but only when taken completely without context and completely without analysis of historical events. There is no cause and effect as implied by the juxtaposition of the statements. With Gaza effectively sealed off and controlled in all facets by Israel, and with daily routine shelling, mortar fire, and sniper fire by the IDF, the scale of violence was perpetrated mainly by the Israelis. Also, it did not take much U.S. "pressure" to convince Israel to negate the democratic election of Hamas to power within the Palestinian territories and to try and create a civil war in Gaza between Fatah and Hamas, with U.S./Israeli support going to Fatah.

Finally Gelb comes around to the U.S. again, saying, "the United States has pushed and pulled Israel toward concessions, but received little or no credit from the Arab side." Unfortunately for Gelb's argument, with all the economic and military support that the U.S. has provided and continues to provide to Israel over the last four decades, much more than talk could have been presented as pressure. The Israelis know quite well that the U.S. presents a good rhetorical front about peace and democracy, but will only act in areas where its geopolitical concerns are being denied or harmed. The "American role has been real and substantial" only in that sense, a real and substantial support of the Israeli government and its actions in Palestine.

The summary is that both Israel and the U.S. deserve "credit for their concrete efforts to make peace." Those concrete efforts amount to a huge increase in settlements made of concrete, a security 'fence' made in part of concrete, many concrete road blocks and inspection points, and ironically, the destruction of much Palestinian civilian infrastructure wherein concrete has been transformed into rubble. There is much more concrete in the bypass roads and other infrastructure to support the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory. The U.S. also accepts Israeli ambiguity on its nuclear weapons, its main reactor at Dimona protected under layers of concrete, simply another part of the U.S.' double standards when dealing with nuclear powers both in and out of the NPT.

All other efforts on the part of the U.S. are simply political rhetoric to sound good for domestic money and votes, and to rationalize its geopolitical strategies in the region. Along with that, the Palestinian Papers reveal how much the Palestinians were willing to concede to the Israelis concerning settlements, Jerusalem, and the right of return. If someone of Gelb's credentials and contacts was unaware of this, he wilfully remained so, and while it is convenient to argue from hindsight, Gelb certainly should have been aware that the now disgraced Palestinian negotiators were offering much more than the populace would accept.

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