

The role of diaspora Jewry in the Arab-Israeli conflict

Another MENA conflict of global significance in which diasporas figure importantly is the conflict over Palestine that dates from the late nineteenth century. A modern Jewish nationalist movement, Zionism, emerged by 1897 and adopted the goal of creating a Jewish state in Palestine, then part of the Ottoman domain. In 1948, the Jewish state of Israel was proclaimed and Arab-Israeli conflict has ensued ever since. Jewish diasporic communities, principally in Europe and North America, played key roles in supporting the Zionist movement and later the state of Israel. American Jewry played a particularly significant role in the improbable success of the Zionist project.

A number of scholars have examined the history of pro-Zionist and later pro-Israeli behaviour of mainly American Jews ranging from voting to fundraising to going to fight for the Israeli cause (Mearsheimer and Walt, 2007; Wawro, 2011). In this complex history, a number of key factors emerge. One is the geography of Jewish communities in the US. Most Jews live in major states in large cities. In the US electoral system, states cast large winner-take-all blocs of electoral votes that elect US presidents. Hence, the geography of the Jewish population along with the peculiarities of the system for electing US presidents make the Jewish electorate very important despite the fact the Jews comprise only two per cent of the US population. Moreover, Jews are viewed as an important source for campaign donations, a vital concern in American elections. Hence, a pro-Israeli lobby has played an important role in US domestic politics and in US foreign policy. This figured centrally in the Zionist quest for statehood and later in Israel's conflicts with Arab states and the still stateless Palestinian people, many of whom became refugees as a result of Israel's War of Independence and its subsequent conflicts.

Some analysts view diasporic Jewry, especially hardline American Jews, as a key factor in Israeli intransigence on a number of territorial and settlement-related issues that have rendered a comprehensive peace settlement an elusive goal. On the other hand, diasporic communities can also become a factor in conflict resolution as suggested by the important support evinced by American Jewry for the Israeli Peace Now Movement, which espouses a two-state solution to the conflict.

References

- Mearsheimer, J. and Walt, S. (2007) *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux).
- Wawro, G. (2011) *Quicksand: America's Pursuit of Power in the Middle East* (New York: Penguin Press).