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## The US Veto over Palestine's UN Membership

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## The US veto over Palestine's UN membership

TIMOTHY WILLIAM WATERS<sup>S</sup> 26 September 2011

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**While the United Nations is in debate over Palestinians' request for UN membership, the US has already announced their decision to veto. But the over two thirds of Americans who are neither Jewish nor Evangelical should consider saying yes. It may not solve every problem but it could increase the prospects for successful negotiations between Palestine and Israel.**

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The US has vowed to veto the Palestinian [request](#) for membership in the United Nations, at great risk to its reputation in the Muslim world. Diplomats are scrambling for a solution – but the majority of Americans stand in the way.

Many Americans' support for Israel is automatic and comprehensive. They believe Americans owe Israel special support because of the Holocaust. They respect Israel's pioneer spirit, entrepreneurial economy and robust democracy; and their support only strengthened after the attacks on 9/11.

What those people are mostly not, however, is Jewish or Evangelical Christian. Not, in other words, a member of either of the two religious groups which supposedly underpin America's knee-jerk, dogmatic support for Israel. The truth is, support for Israel is far broader, and if a policy breakthrough is ever going to happen, it has got to come from the majority of Americans whose reasons for supporting Israel – assuming they've ever thought about it – spring from other sources.

It is unlikely many American Jews or Christian Evangelicals will rethink their backing for Israel – certainly not overnight – and there is no reason why they should. Whether devout or secular, the two percent of Americans who are Jewish overwhelmingly support Israel for unimpeachable reasons grounded in the most profound sympathetic identification. And while it is worth debating the interpretation of scripture accepted by the quarter of Americans who are Evangelical –

But for the over two thirds of Americans who are neither Jewish nor Evangelical, relations with Israel should be governed by the same principles that govern our relations with Laos, Finland, or Bolivia: look to cooperate, but treat them as states with their own interests, and follow our own.

Once you think in terms of traditional national interests, it is hard to see why America is so uniformly supportive of Tel Aviv. True, Israel has a preternaturally powerful military (into which we pump billions of dollars every year), but it is almost laughably unavailable to us as an ally. During the Gulf War, we had to plead with the Israel Defense Force to stay in barracks, to avoid breaking our coalition with Arab states. Israeli soldiers can't fight alongside Americans in Iraq and Afghanistan, lest we confirm Al-Qaeda's rants about a Jewish-Crusader alliance. And the oil lubricating the world's economies is not underneath Israel.

It's true Israel has a vibrant democracy, but it is hardly an exemplary model for the region, since Arabs focus on Israel's decidedly undemocratic occupation of Palestine. In any event, for decades we have shown little interest in democracy in the rest of the Middle East, because we knew Arab democracy could jeopardize Israel. Pro-Israeli pundits have long peddled the intellectual snake oil that popular anti-Israel sentiment was just ginned up by dictators to distract their own oppressed populations. The Arab spring has put paid to that nonsense: In Egypt and elsewhere, newly free Arabs are freely rethinking the old dictatorships' US-sponsored *status quo* with Israel.

Our lockstep alliance with Israel yields remarkably few benefits and extracts enormous costs. And it is lockstep: don't let recent attacks calling President Obama an unreliable ally of Israel fool you – that is the narcissism of small differences. In the monoculture of American policy, the choice is between unquestioning fidelity to Israel and unflinching fidelity to Israel. The best proof is this week's UN debate. There is certainly something embarrassing in the spectacle of President Obama announcing his intention to veto Palestinian statehood from the same UN platform on which, last year, he called for a Palestinian state within twelve months. The UN crisis is not being caused by the Palestinians' decision to seek statehood, but by the US' insistence on vetoing it. All our diplomatic energy has been on avoiding a vote – not for one moment have we considered doing anything else.

There is a clear alternative: The US could actually vote *for* Palestinian statehood. A willingness to vote yes would hardly solve every problem, but Palestinian flexibility would be exponentially increased if the unthinkable prize of an affirmative US vote were on offer – and so might Israel's willingness once it realized America's support was no longer guaranteed. Indeed, a vote might increase the prospects for successful negotiations if it were conditioned on each side – or just the Palestinians to start – agreeing to recognize the other *without* specifying the frontier. Each could identify one small area that it would unconditionally recognize as part of the other state – say, north Tel Aviv and Jericho – but without conceding anything else now. Two states west of the Jordan, borders TBD.

That's not going to happen. But that's exactly what Americans need to ask themselves: why isn't it? This week's vote is being

portrayed as a crisis. But the vote isn't the problem. The total impossibility of voting for Palestinian statehood – even though US policy actually favours a Palestinian state alongside Israel, 'side by side in peace and security' – *is* the problem. Our inability to imagine, let alone articulate, a yes vote is what must change – and only Americans with no sectarian dog in the fight can do the imagining.

Political scientists tell us that tiny but motivated special interests often dominate policy, because the unmotivated majority cedes the field. When it comes to the Middle East, that 'special interest' includes nearly one-third of Americans. But big as that group is, its interests are special indeed – parochial and grounded in religious sensibilities the majority of Americans don't share. It is time for the other two-thirds to ask what their interests are. Think about it, America – and then write to your congressman.

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### About the author

[Timothy William Waters](#) is an associate professor at Indiana University Maurer School of Law, where he researches the creation of new states, and teaches international and Islamic law. He helped prepare the indictment of Slobodan Milosevic for crimes in Kosovo.



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