

Interview - Michael Koplow

Written by E-International Relations

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E-INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, JUN 25 2017

Michael J. Koplow is the policy director of the Israel Policy Forum. His work has appeared in Security Studies, Foreign Affairs, The Wall Street Journal, The National Interest, Foreign Policy, The American Interest, and The Atlantic, among other publications. He is the editor of Matzav, a leading source for commentary and analysis on Israeli politics, society, and foreign policy, and is the author of the Ottomans and Zionists blog. He tweets from @mkoplow

Where do you see the most exciting research or debate happening in the area of Middle Eastern politics?

The most exciting debate that I see taking place is in the realm of the intersection of social movements and political change. From the Green Revolution to the Arab Spring to the Gezi Park protests, there have been and will continue to be large protest movements in the region, and the burning question is under what conditions those movements successfully effect political change, and how to transition from social protest to formal politics. In most cases, this transition has been an abysmal failure, and one of the ongoing debates is whether protests against entrenched regimes or incumbents – whether it be people massing in the streets or voting against current leaders – can ever be enough without the hard work of organizing and creating a formal political opposition. The rise of social media has particularly impacted this question, and while much of what we thought we knew about politics and elections has been upended in the U.S. as a result, in the Middle East the backlash against the elite and formal institutions through new forms of interaction and communication has had far less tangible success. This is where the most exciting research going forward will focus.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

My thinking has unquestionably changed over time, primarily from moving away from large systemic explanations and toward a more granular understanding of how domestic politics in individual countries is often the best explanation for a country's foreign policy. I have no doubt that this is colored in some ways by the fact that I primarily study Israel and Turkey, two countries where domestic concerns drive foreign policy in ways large and small. The single thing that prompted the most significant shift in my understanding of the world was the Abu Ghraib scandal during the early years of the U.S. presence in Iraq following the Iraq War, as it taught me both the value of healthy skepticism and the importance of working hard to understand how actions are seen on both sides of a conflict. Particularly when it comes to analyzing policy outcomes, there is no substitute for embracing uncomfortable truths over convenient slogans and seeing the world as it is rather than how you would like it to be.

In a recent Op-Ed, Shmuel Rosner discussed the general annoyance the Israeli electorate entertains towards the left more broadly. Do you see a perpetual ineptitude of leadership among leftist parties in Israel or is there more to the right-ward shift in Israeli politics?

There is more to the rightward shift in Israeli politics than the ineptitude of the left – from security concerns to a strain of nationalist populism to societal cleavages that the right is better at using to its advantage – but no question that the fecklessness of the opposition has had an impact. It goes beyond specific leaders and politicians to a worrisome

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attitude on the left that has yet to grapple with its own policy failures or acknowledge the way Israeli society has changed. Israel is far from being a perfect country and most Israelis understand that, but at the same time Israelis understandably recoil from people and movements that perpetually blame Israel for all of the country's ills while always making excuses for Israel's foes. This is not unique to the left in Israel, but because of the primacy of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it manifests itself in a more pervasive way. There is a route toward political relevance for the Israeli left that focuses on pragmatic and sensible solutions to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, inequality in Israeli society, and cultural divides among Israelis, but the traditional parties on the left have not quite found it yet. Until the leftwing bubble is punctured, it will be difficult for the left to win elections given where the Israeli electorate is at.

What effect does this shift have on settlements and what do you make of the future viability of a Palestinian state?

The issue for most Israelis who continue to vote for the right is not so much settlements per se but a fundamental distrust of the idea that a Palestinian state will accept Israel and live next to it in peace. It is why a majority of Israelis support a two-state solution but also do not believe that there is a viable Palestinian partner. The settlement blocs are entrenched in the minds of most Israelis as areas that Israel will keep in any deal, but not many Israelis are attached to far flung settlements deep in the West Bank, and would happily give them up in an agreement that they think advances Israeli interests. It is the reason that a future Palestinian state remains viable from a territorial perspective. The question is not whether a Palestinian state can be created in the West Bank in a way that Palestinians can accept, since the answer to that is a clear yes, but whether a Palestinian state will have the necessary institutions and infrastructure to be successful. In my opinion, it is incumbent upon the current Israeli government to do everything in its power to ensure that the answer to this latter question is also yes.

You have recently argued that Israel as Jewish state does not necessarily “disadvantag[e] non-Jewish citizens.” How will the debate over Israel as a Jewish state and its non-Jewish citizens play out over the coming years?

The Jewish state issue is one that the current government has prioritized in both domestic and foreign policy, largely because it is an easy way to stoke nationalist sentiment that benefits the government's own political position. These questions are going to remain at the forefront of Israeli political debates, not only between Israel's Jewish and non-Jewish citizens but within the Jewish sphere as well. On the Israeli right, there is a camp that sees Israel's Jewish character as something to be protected and a camp that sees Israel's Jewish character as something to be aggressively asserted, and it is along these lines that the debate has played out and will continue to play out.

Relations between Turkey and Israel have remained negative particularly from Turkey since the Mavi Marmara incident. Why is that and how do you see relations developing after Erdoğan's referendum?

Turkey and Israel have a relationship of convenience rather than affinity. The Mavi Marmara incident exposed this, but so did the eventual reconciliation, and it is why the aspects of bilateral relations that depend more on trust – security and intelligence cooperation – are still in a deep freeze while the aspects that depend on easy mutual interests, such as trade and tourism, are humming along. Israel is an easy target for Erdoğan, since he only wins votes by attacking Israel and will not face any voices in the opposition that call for closer relations with Israel, and thus he will always hold Israel at arm's length. On the Israeli side, the benefits that Israel enjoyed from aligning with Turkey are no longer as present or as necessary, and thus it is not a relationship that Israel is going to work hard to protect when other factors make it so tenuous. The constitutional referendum that handed Erdoğan his executive presidency is not going to alter this dynamic in any way, and what we have seen in the Turkey-Israel sphere for the past decade is what we will continue to see; a robust economic relationship combined with a frosty diplomatic relationship that will be constantly subject to rupture, particularly when there are flare ups between Israel and the Palestinians.

After President Trump's first international trip to Saudi Arabia and Israel, do you feel there will be any policy shift towards the Palestinian Authority and Israel, particularly after the intelligence fallout?

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I don't think there will be any policy shifts as a result of the trip itself, but I think any policy shifts that do occur will relate to how Israel and the Palestinian Authority respond to Trump's peace process initiatives, which he appears determined to press. Both sides seem to be trying hard to remain on Trump's good side, with Netanyahu warning his coalition against any sudden moves and insisting that Israel does not have a blank check from Trump on settlements, and Abbas dropping any preconditions for entering into negotiations that he has insisted upon in the past. On the intelligence fallout issue, the security and intelligence relationship between the U.S. and Israel is too important, robust, and institutionalized across all levels of government on both sides for it to be destroyed by any single president.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of Middle Eastern politics?

Reading the academic literature and understanding the scholarly debates is important, but it is far more important to follow the daily ins and outs of the politics of whichever countries you are studying. Read the press from the countries you study every day (ideally in the original language); follow its experts and journalists on social media; spend as much time on the ground as you can getting to know the countries' society and culture rather than only burying yourself in archives and libraries. I find that my instincts on Israeli politics from spending so much time in the country, for instance, are nearly always more valuable than anything else I can bring to bear on my understanding, and by spending time each day immersing myself in issues big and small, it helps me make sense of the wider political and historical trends. Seeing as many aspects that you can of the smaller pictures will help you to see the big picture in a way that you otherwise never would.

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This interview was conducted by Javier Alonso. Javier is an Associate Features Editor with E-IR.