Moynihan vs Resolution 3379

Drawing on Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s papers, transcripts of secretary of state Henry Kissinger’s conversations and president Gerald Ford’s Oval Office briefings, Gil Troy shows how the US ambassador to the UN took on ‘Zionism is Racism’

On November 10, 1975, after the United Nations General Assembly passed Resolution 3379, which announced that “Zionism is a form of racism and racial discrimination,” Daniel Patrick Moynihan, the US ambassador to the UN, rose to declare that his country “does not acknowledge, it will not abide, it will never accede in this infamous act. The lie is that Zionism is a form of racism. The overwhelmingly clear truth is that it is not.”

A year later, when he was no longer ambassador, Moynihan btasted at allegations that he had unnecessarily agitated the very nation whose support he needed. “Did I make a case out of this obvious resolution? Damn right I did!”

But Moynihan’s moment, America’s fight against Zionism as Racism, Gil Troy, a professor of history at McGill University and a research fellow at the Shalem Harman Institute’s Engaging Israel Program (and a Jerusalem Post columnist), provides a detailed examination of the run-up to the resolution and its impact on Moynihan’s career, American politics and Israel’s status in international relations. Words matter, Troy demonstrates. Resolution 3379 he argues, was an early warning of anti-American and anti-Israeli sentiment and is Western sensibility-pushed the envelope. Channelling “moralistic anger to boost morale,” Moynihan’s response belongs to a sequence of events, including the 1980 US Olympic hockey team’s “Miracle on Ice,” which went from inducing Americans out of their post-Vietnam despair” well before Ronald Reagan was elected president.

The book is a love letter to Moynihan, who is portrayed as a visionary for and a model of moral clarity. Drawing on Moynihan’s papers, transcripts of secretary of state Henry Kissinger’s conversations and president Gerald Ford’s Oval Office briefings, Troy shows that the ambassador often went beyond his instructions. He acted as a basketball coach, Troy suggests, calling on his success to compel his coach to back his unorthodox moves.

Kissinger, however, often betrayed his annoyance with the ambassador, especially when he thought he had been upstaged. Mentioning “this Israeli thing,” he accused Moynihan “not to ruin it into a monumental event before it has happened” or make the resolution “a test of manhood.” On November 10, Kissinger told an aide to tell Moynihan “that will not stand for that anymore. Tell him you are not direct instructions from me.” Although he cut “some offensive sections” from his speech, the ambassador insisted that the US would exact “consequences” for bad behavior.

MOYNIHAN’S MOMENT

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Troy tends to exaggerate the impact of Moynihan’s speech on American politics. His “stand against Soviet and third world bullying” didn’t really inspire Reagan’s more aggressive approach to the UN. And the claim that he was more assiduous in shaping the national conversation than building his power base” sets up a false dichotomy and ignores Moynihan’s career as a savvy US senator from New York, home to Jewish voters and donors.

Troy’s characterization of Moynihan’s contemporaries also tend to be polemical and, at times, simplistic. Kissinger was not an appeaser, Jimmy Carter is not best understood as a Georgian George McGovern, Barack Obama did not “eschew Moynihan’s moral clarity” in favor of “an accommodating apologetic streak toward some American adversaries.”

More importantly, no doubt, Troy does not adequately explain the rise of anti-Israeli sentiment around the world. He asserts that Resolution 3379 was “of Soviet manufacture” but does not analyze how the Russians sold it to other governments. He does not investigate the causes of growing opposition to Israel in Western Europe. Without elaborating, he makes the controversial claim that attitudes toward Israel “had more to do with ideological trends than particular Israeli actions regarding the Palestinians,” be they positive or negative, and that the “apartheid” between Israelis and Palestinians was “dictated by security needs in the West Bank, Israeli settler ideology, and Palestinians’ own desires.” Although he acknowledges that “not all criticism of Israel or even Zionism is anti-Semitic” and that “valid criticisms of both sides in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is ‘required’,” examples of such criticism are not to be found in Moynihan’s moment.

Resolution 3379 was repealed in 1991. Deputy secretary of state Lawrence Eagleburger suggested that the vote strengthened Israel’s standing in the world, Troy denies it: “a strong link in a chain of good news” that included a handshake between prime minister Yitzhak Rabin and PLO leader Yasir Arafat that launched the Oslo peace process “and paved the way for a clear rejection of terrorism by the international community.”

Troy acknowledges, however, that the “ideology matters, along with words.” And Moynihan’s moment was, as Troy reminds us, “resonant, repugnant and remarkably relevant today.” But actions matter as well and they can help us understand the genesis of and aftereffects from Resolution 3379.

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