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Abstract - Luncheon Keynote Address

“Changing Perceptions of the Palestinian Question in the US”

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A broad survey of the changing ways in which Palestinians and the Palestine Question have been viewed in the US over the past three decades will be examined. The perceptions of many Americans, and especially of members of the policy elite, have been heavily influenced by pro-Israeli propaganda, some of it very extremist, mounting almost to racist incitement. But they have also been influenced by the actions of Palestinians themselves. This was most notable during the First Intifada, and during the early years of the Madrid/Oslo process of negotiations, both of which led to greatly increased American sympathies. But the actions of some Palestinians have also had very negative effects on American perceptions. This has been the case most clearly with the suicide bombers, but also with the rocketeers. Another negative effect has flowed from the very unfortunate split within the Palestinian movement, which leaves many otherwise sympathetic Americans unclear about whom to support. Recent developments in US opinion include the effects of last December’s Israeli assault on Gaza, and President Obama’s continuing split with the Netanyahu government on the settlement issue, the rise of strong new questioning of the Netanyahu government’s policies from within the Jewish community - and the emergence within the US public discourse of new generations of very well-educated and articulate Palestinian-Americans. These are all great developments, but the road ahead most likely remains long.