Barbara Slavin

Should Israel Become a "Normal" Nation?

Founded in the aftermath of the Holocaust amid violent rejection from its neighbors, Israel has long insisted on extraordinary freedom of action to defend its existence as a Jewish majority state. But external pressures are rising, creating a diplomatic crisis that may constrain Israel's tendency to use massive military force against adversaries. Increasingly, questions are being raised even by those sympathetic to Israel about whether its military conduct and unresolved conflict with the Palestinians are impinging on the U.S. ability to fight wars in two Muslim nations and to counter anti-U.S. sentiment in the wider Muslim and developing world. There is also an emerging debate about the wisdom and feasibility of Israel refusing to acknowledge its arsenal of nuclear weapons, while demanding that other countries in the Middle East foreswear them.

Supporters of Israeli policies say it is not Israel's fault that it is not yet a "normal" nation with fully defined borders and general acceptance. They decry what they call an unjust international campaign to "de-legitimize" Israel led by European leftists, pro-Palestinian activists, and anti-Zionist Jews. This campaign includes comparing Israeli policies to those of apartheid South Africa or, even more horrifying, Nazi Germany, accusing Israel of using disproportionate force while downplaying continuing threats to Israeli security. In the view of many if not most Israelis, Israel should not expect or covet the approbation of the outside world as it pursues policies intended to safeguard Israeli lives.

It is clear, however, that since 2001, Israeli governments have, to some extent, brought this crisis upon themselves by failing to project a sincere desire to pursue

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a comprehensive peace. A thoughtful study by the Reut Institute in Tel Aviv argues that it is time for Israel "to make a more credible and consistent commitment" to ending the occupation and to integrating Arab citizens of Israel proper more fully into Israeli society.[1] Otherwise, hostility toward Israel will grow in the West, particularly Europe, and Israel will increasingly be seen as a strategic burden by its one crucial ally, the United States.

"Normal" Compared to What?

In posing the question of this article's title, one must first define what one means by a "normal" country: normal in comparison to other small democracies, normal compared to a superpower like the United States, or normal in the context of Israel's volatile and often brutal neighborhood? Certainly, the Israel of 2010 is far more democratic and humane than Egypt, Jordan, or Syria. Nothing Israel has done to Palestinians or Lebanese comes close to Syria's assault on Hama in 1982 that killed as many as 20,000 Syrians and gave rise to the expression "Hama rules." Robert Satloff, executive director of The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, claims that Israeli actions are also no worse than those of the United States whose forces have killed or contributed to the deaths of tens of thousands of civilians in Iraq and Afghanistan. "The uniqueness of the Israeli case is that it has had no moment in a state of peace since its birth," Satloff says. "That sets it outside almost every nation in the United Nations."[2]

Israeli actions are controversial in part because they contrast with the hopes of its founders.

Israeli actions are controversial in part because they contrast with the hopes of its founders. The Zionist vision was to create a country reflecting the highest humanitarian ideals and thus redeem a tragic history. David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first prime minister, when introducing his government to the Knesset in 1949, said that it was not sufficient to build a nation in which people could eat, drink, and raise children. "Our activities and policy are guided not by economic considerations alone," he said, "but by a political and social vision that we have inherited from our prophets and imbibed from the heritage of our greatest sages and the teachers of our own day."[3]

Israel—as the old television commercial for Hebrew National franks used to say—was accountable to "a higher authority." It would be governed in a way that would secure the lasting admiration of the world, and lure Diaspora Jews, including those who had options to live safely and prosperously elsewhere, to its shores. The new state was not only to be the solution to the 2,000-year-old

Jewish question of exile and extermination, but a light among nations in how it treated non-Jews.

All countries, of course, have creation myths that contain elements of truth, but remain essentially myths. While the United States considers itself a "melting pot" since the eighteenth century, U.S. settlers had little regard for native Americans and built much of their new nation with African slave labor—though that was in the days before such inhumanity could be recorded and broadcast by YouTube. The United States, after more than 200 years, still has trouble digesting immigrants from Latin America.

In Israel's case, the violent circumstances of its birth militated against the utopian vision of its founders. Jewish immigration to Israel had already touched off riots by Palestinian Arabs in the 1920s and 1930s, as well as a full-scale war before Israeli independence in 1948 during which Israeli forces engaged in ethnic cleansing of Arabs. Most Arabs, thinking they could defeat Israel militarily, had rejected a 1947 UN partition plan that would have allotted 45 percent of the old British mandate for a new Arab state. In the end, Israel wound up with 80 percent of that territory; the other 20 percent was under Egyptian and Jordanian control until 1967.[4]

Yet, if Israel faced rejection from its neighbors, it found considerable acceptance and sympathy outside the Middle East in its early years. According to Samuel Lewis, a former U.S. ambassador to Israel and sympathetic observer:

> They've [Israel] never had a period going back to 1949 when they lacked enemies or people trying to eliminate them. But during the period between the [1949] armistice and the [1967] Six Day War, they went to great effort to become normal and accepted around the world. They set up aid programs in Africa and technical assistance programs in dozens of countries in the developing world. They brought third world people to Israel. By the mid-60s, they really felt they had been accepted not by the immediate neighborhood but by the world at large.[5]

David Becomes Goliath

That perception began to change after Israel definitively proved its military superiority over its neighbors in the 1967 war. The swift victory left Israel in control of large swaths of new territory, providing strategic depth, but also the challenge of ruling millions of additional Arab subjects. Still, the narrative that depicted Israel as the plucky David fighting the Arab Goliath persisted even as the Israeli government began to encourage Jewish settlements in the newly occupied land. That narrative began to change when, three years after a 1979 peace treaty with Egypt that entailed withdrawing from Sinai, Israel invaded Lebanon to try to crush the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and stop rocket as well as guerrilla attacks on Israel's north. The war expelled the PLO from Lebanon at the cost of more than 6,000 Arab lives, including hundreds of

Palestinians massacred by Lebanese Christians in the refugee camps of Sabra and Chatila, while Israeli troops stood by.[6]

Five years later, Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza mounted their first uprising or *intifada*. Palestinian boys hurling stones at well-armed Israeli soldiers became the new Davids; on television screens throughout the world, the new Goliath was Israel. The first intifada "exposed that the occupation was not the benign experience Israel had portrayed it as in the 1970s," said Bruce Riedel, a former CIA officer in Israel and senior National Security Council official dealing with the Middle East in the administrations of the two Bushes and Bill Clinton.[7]

The 1990s was a time of reduced isolation for Israel as successive Israeli governments, with active U.S. participation, sought to achieve a comprehensive peace in a landscape made more conducive for peacemaking by the fall of the Soviet Union, the containment of Iraq, and Iranian weakness following the 1980–1988 Iran–Iraq war. The fruits of this decade included the 1993 Oslo accords with the PLO and the 1994 peace treaty with Jordan. The period ended with the failure of the U.S.-mediated negotiations between Israel and Syria as well as between Israel and the Palestinians, the start of a second intifada, and the election of a new government headed by Ariel Sharon, the architect of both the settlement policy and the 1982 Lebanon invasion.

Today, any sympathetic international environment for Israel has evaporated.

Sharon realized that demographic realities were making prolonged Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza untenable if Israel was to remain both democratic and a Jewish-majority state. He decided to withdraw from Gaza, the least appealing Palestinian enclave, in part in hopes of staving off pressure to relinquish territory in the West Bank, where Israel has more significant strategic and historic religious claims.[8] The benefits of the 2005 withdrawal from Gaza, however, were undercut by the fact that it was unilateral. By then, Israel had crippled the leadership of Yasir Arafat, keeping him under siege in Ramallah until he became fatally ill. In the meantime, Hamas, the fundamentalist organization initially encouraged by Israel as a rival to the PLO, grew in strength and won the 2006 elections for the Palestinian legislature.

In 2007, Hamas seized Gaza from secular Palestinian authorities. Israel—with Egypt—imposed a stringent blockade in an effort to weaken Hamas and bolster Fatah in the West Bank. When that failed to stop rocket attacks from Gaza on Israeli towns, Israel mounted Operation Cast Lead. The assault from December 27, 2008 to January 18, 2009 killed more than a thousand Palestinians—most of them civilians—at a cost of 13 Israeli soldiers' lives. Two years earlier, Israel had

attacked Lebanon in a similarly massive fashion to retaliate for rocket attacks and the ambush of several Israeli soldiers along the border by the Shi'ite militia, Hezbollah. Israeli officials defend both operations as necessary to end attacks on Israeli civilians and deter Arabs from seizing Israeli soldiers. No other nation in the world, they say, would permit rockets to fall on towns and cities without retaliating.

Israel's offensives in Lebanon and Gaza were also in keeping with a strategy that emerged under the Labor party government of Prime Minister Ehud Barak (1999–2001). Barak decided to withdraw unilaterally from a buffer strip in southern Lebanon in 2000 after the failure of U.S.-brokered efforts to achieve peace with Syria. "In the late '90s, the belief was that if we withdraw to internationally recognized borders and we are passive behind those borders, if we are attacked, the international community will give us the latitude to respond harshly," said Gidi Grinstein, a former Barak aide and peace negotiator who founded the Reut Institute in 2004. "This was to be the source of our deterrence."[9] But the large Arab casualties and widespread devastation of Arab property—while buying Israelis temporary respite from attacks—did not sit well at a time when Israel was not perceived to be engaged in serious peace initiatives.

With Friends Like These . . .

Today, any sympathetic international environment, which may have afforded Israel wide latitude of action, has evaporated as Israel has become a regional superpower and the plight of stateless Palestinians has persisted. Israel has also had to adjust to a U.S. administration less tolerant of Israeli military actions and settlement policies than the administration of George W. Bush. "There was a time when the international community tolerated exceptional Israeli practices because of the Holocaust and because it was perceived as fighting for its existence," said Ori Nir, a former reporter for the *Ha'aretz* and *Forward* newspapers and now the spokesman for Americans for Peace Now. "Then there was a time – in the 90s – when Israel was perceived as seriously pursuing peace. Today, this doesn't exist anymore. This government is not perceived as peace-seeking but as striving to perpetuate an occupation that the world does not accept."[10]

The shift in international perceptions began to harden after the 2008–2009 Gaza war. A UN-led investigation of Operation Cast Lead was particularly damaging. The report—prepared under the stewardship of a South African judge of Jewish extraction, Richard Goldstone, who had prosecuted alleged human rights abusers in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia—accused both Israel and Hamas of war crimes.[11]

Has Israel become a strategic liability to the United States?

Other incidents undermined Israel's relations with the West. On January 19, 2010, a Hamas official blamed in the deaths of two Israeli soldiers was killed in Dubai in what appeared to be an action by the Mossad intelligence agency. The assassins, who were photographed by hotel cameras, entered Dubai using counterfeit passports from European and other foreign countries. An ensuing uproar led Australia, Ireland, and the United Kingdom to expel Israeli diplomats.[12]

Then on May 31, 2010, Israeli commandos landed on a Turkish ship, the *Mavi Marmara*, in international waters as it headed toward Gaza with humanitarian supplies. Israel also boarded five smaller vessels, which proceeded without incident, but some on the *Mavi Marmara* resisted violently, hitting the Israelis with pipes and clubs. In the ensuing mayhem, Israeli commandos opened fire, killing eight Turks and one Turkish-American while wounding others including activists from dozens of nations.

The Israeli government said its actions were justified to make sure weapons did not enter Gaza, and accused those aboard the *Mavi Marmara*—including members of a group with alleged links to terrorists—of deliberately provoking a bloody outcome. One Israeli columnist went so far as to label those who died "suicide protestors."[13] But for those who remember when Israeli commandos rescued 103 hostages (while three hostages and one Israeli commando were killed) from an airplane hijacked by Arab terrorists in Entebbe, Uganda in 1976, the flotilla operation seemed neither heroic nor adept.

The Israeli assault has brought relations with Turkey, once a valued Muslim ally, to a breaking point. Reaction elsewhere was also harsh, even among those sympathetic to Israeli concerns. Writing in the *New Republic*, Leon Wieseltier called the assault on the flotilla "a stupid gift to delegitimators," continuing:

> It is hard not to conclude from this Israeli action, and also from other Israeli actions in recent years, that the Israeli leadership simply does not care any longer about what anybody thinks. It does not seem to care about what even the United States—its only real friend, even in the choppy era of Obama—thinks. This is not defiance, it is despair. The Israeli leadership seems to have given up any expectation of fairness and sympathy from the world. It is behaving as if it believes, in the manner of the most perilous Jewish pessimism, that the whole world hates the Jews, and that is all there is to it. This is the very opposite of the measured and empirical attitude, the search for strategic opportunity, the enlistment of imagination in the service of ideals and interests, that is required for statecraft.[14]

In the aftermath of the raid, Anthony Cordesman—a respected military and Middle East expert at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)

who advised former Republican presidential candidate and staunch Israel supporter, John McCain—asked whether Israel had become a "strategic liability" to the United States. "It is time Israel realized that it has obligations to the United States, as well as the United States to Israel, and that it become far more careful about the extent to which it tests the limit of U.S. patience and exploits the support of American Jews," Cordesman wrote in a commentary posted on the CSIS Website. "This does not mean taking a single action that undercuts Israeli security, but it does mean realizing that Israel should show enough discretion to reflect the fact that it is a tertiary U.S. strategic interest in a complex and demanding world.[15]

In a subsequent interview, Cordesman said that Israel had never been a major strategic asset to the United States, and that the question is whether it has now shifted from "limited asset to limited liability." During the Cold War, when Israel was a pro-U.S. bastion, Israeli victories over Soviet-supplied Arabs arguably showed the superiority of U.S. weapons. Cordesman, however, said "we never got technology [in return] that was particularly useful, and Israel used U.S. technology in a way that gave away useful information to the Soviet Union." He gave as an example Israel's assault, during the Lebanon war in 1982, on Syrian air defenses which, Cordesman said, prompted the Soviet Union to "reorganize and restructure the air defenses of the Warsaw Pact." In more recent times, U.S. administrations have had to admonish Israel not to sell weapons containing sensitive U.S. technology to China.[16]

Satloff disagrees with this assessment, saying that Israel has been a "world leader in developing drone technology" and has taken actions—such as the destruction of nuclear sites in Iraq and Syria—that have benefited the United States and the world at large. Still he concedes that "there are obviously more constraints on the ability to operate freely in the service of one's national security today than two–three decades ago."[17]

Israel's perceived transition from limited asset to limited liability reflects the changing nature of threats to U.S. national security and the types of wars the United States now wages. Israel has received more U.S. military aid than any other nation, but cannot fight alongside U.S. forces in Iraq or Afghanistan because that would antagonize local Muslim populations. Even before the September 11, 2001 attacks, during the 1991 Gulf War, the administration of George H.W. Bush convinced Israel to stay out of a 34-nation coalition against Saddam Hussein for fear of alienating Muslim allies.

Yossi Alpher, a veteran of the Mossad and former director of the Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies at Tel Aviv University, says the U.S. strategic view of Israel has changed as "the U.S. has become a full-fledged Middle East military power, with 200,000 ground troops and a huge naval and air presence." In addition, Alpher says, "There are serious security/political figures in the U.S. who believe

that 'Israel is dragging the U.S. into war with Iran, much the way the U.S. dragged the United Kingdom into war with Iraq.'" [18] Israel regards Iran's expanding nuclear program as an existential threat, but lacks the ability to deliver a devastating blow against Iran's myriad nuclear facilities as it did against Iraq's Osiraq facility in 1981 and against a Syrian reactor in 2007. For the United States, a nuclear Iran is a serious concern but one that many believe can be contained without military preemption.

Of course, the long U.S. alliance with Israel has always had less to do with U.S. strategic needs than with cultural affinity. The U.S. Department of State staunchly opposed President Harry Truman when he recognized the Jewish state, warning of adverse consequences for U.S. relations with Arab nations such as Saudi Arabia. "I've never believed that the primary reason for the alliance was strategic," says Aaron David Miller, a veteran Middle East peace negotiator for several U.S. administrations. "Value affinity is the reason we give so much latitude to the Israelis. We have a stake in supporting like-minded societies. That core has enabled the anomalies in Israel's behavior to be rationalized and accepted especially after 9/11."[19]

Israel is losing the U.S. intellectual elite, including large numbers of secular and young Jews.

In the era of Obama, however, those affinities appear to have diverged. U.S. opinion polls still show majority support for Israel (although that has declined after the Gaza flotilla incident)[20] and backing in the U.S. Congress, particularly the House of Representatives, is legendary. Israel, however, is losing the U.S. intellectual elite—including large numbers of secular Jews and young Jews—in large part because of human rights concerns.[21] Such concerns also figure in an expanding international campaign to deny Israel's right to continue to exist as a Jewish-dominated state. The Reut Institute identifies "hubs of de-legitimization" in "London, potentially Paris, Toronto, Madrid and the [San Francisco] Bay Area" where "Israel has been successfully branded by its adversaries as a violent country that violates international law and human rights."[22]

Israelis acknowledge that they are having increasing difficulty deflecting such criticism. The current government has a "seeming total inability to deal with it—not the fringe anti-Semitic part, but the 'Goldstone effect,'" Alpher says, citing the 2009 UN report on the Gaza war. He continued:

> The [Binyamin] Netanyahu government simply cannot grasp how badly the occupation makes us look. But we also are unable to find effective military or diplomatic strategies for dealing with our militant Islamist non-state neighbors, Hezballah and Hamas, and this makes us look bad, too, in terms of 'values.' We are

> not alone in facing this dilemma but we're clearly worst off. We're simply not thinking strategically on some of these issues. Hence, one seeming foul-up after another.[23]

Alpher cited Israel's announcement on June 17, 2010, after the flotilla incident, that it was easing the blockade on Gaza as a victory for Hamas. "We 'won' at sea and stopped the flotilla, but ended up losing to Turkey and Hamas, conceding both a committee of inquiry and the blockade," he said.

Most damaging to Israel's standing has been the prolonged failure to conclude a comprehensive peace, which critics of Israel blame more on Israeli unwillingness to concede territory than on Palestinian intransigence and disarray. Increasingly, this unresolved conflict has entered high-level U.S. national security discourse in a way that is not always supportive of Israel. For example, Gen. David Petraeus, the former head of U.S. Central Command and one of the United States' most acclaimed military figures, drew sharp attention after he told Congress on March 18, 2010 that:

> The enduring hostilities between Israel and some of its neighbors present distinct challenges to our ability to advance our interests. Arab anger over the Palestinian question limits the strength and depth of U.S. partnerships with governments and peoples in the [Middle East] and weakens the legitimacy of moderate regimes in the Arab world.[24]

Israel is the world's only non-declared nuclear weapons state.

Obama also suggested that unresolved conflicts, such as the Arab-Israeli dispute, end "up costing us significantly in terms of both blood and treasure"—a remark that some saw as an oblique swipe at Israel.[25] After the flotilla fiasco, even Israel's own Mossad chief, Meir Dagan, warned the Knesset that Israel was becoming a strategic burden rather than an asset for the United States.[26]

Bombs in the Basement

A further anomaly that keeps Israel from being seen as "normal" is its status as the world's only non-declared nuclear weapons state. Israel is believed to have developed its first nuclear weapon on the eve of the 1967 war and to have scores—if not hundreds—of bombs at its disposal. But it has maintained a "don't ask, don't tell" policy with the cooperation of the United States.

Avner Cohen, author of two books on Israel's nuclear program including a new book, *The Worst-Kept Secret*, says that Israel's policy of nuclear opacity—*amimut* in Hebrew—worked well in its early years, and may have even contributed to Arab willingness to make peace with Israel at a time when Israel's nuclear monopoly was

secure. Now, however, Iran is making strides toward nuclear weapons capability and there are concerns that other countries in the region, such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, may follow suit.

Israel's posture puts the United States in a difficult position. Obama has emphasized nonproliferation as a fundamental national security interest and U.S. officials have stressed their desire to see the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) extend to all nations. A month-long conference to review the treaty in May 2010 ended with a consensus statement that singled out Israel as a non-treaty member and pledged to hold a regional meeting in 2012 to discuss eliminating all weapons of mass destruction from the Middle East. Muslim nations frequently accuse the United States of maintaining a double standard that allows Israel to have nuclear weapons but constrains others.

U.S. officials decline to discuss nuclear activities in public, keeping an understanding with Israel that goes back to 1969. The United States "has never been in the business of compelling any country to do things that they don't believe are in their security interests" was as much as Special Representative of the President for Nonproliferation Susan Burk would say about the topic.[27] Some, however, have suggested that Israeli deterrence against Iran would even be enhanced by revealing the extent of Israel's nuclear arsenal.[28] Daniel Kurtzer, a former U.S. ambassador to Israel, says he would be surprised if the tiny cohort of Israelis who deal with the nuclear issue—"you can probably count them on two hands and maybe a foot"—is not reviewing the policy. "The major advantage [of coming clean] is that you can develop a doctrine and you can play differently in international politics," Kurtzer said.[29]

Becoming a "normal" nation would bring Israel numerous benefits, but also pose new risks.

So, Should Israel Become a "Normal" Nation?

For the purposes of this article, a "normal" Israel is one that would conclude a comprehensive peace agreement relinquishing most of the occupied territory, forswear massive military strikes on adversaries unless facing an equivalent threat, and acknowledge its nuclear status. If Israel were able to manage this transition, it would bring numerous benefits but also pose new risks.

On the plus side, future Israeli politicians and military officers would no longer have to cancel trips to Europe for fear of being arrested at the airport for alleged war crimes. Israeli academics and artists might not face boycotts, and European and American pop stars could appear more readily in Jerusalem and

Tel Aviv. More importantly, Israelis would be able to travel to Arab capitals, such as Damascus and Beirut, which have been off-limits for 62 years. The cold peace that has endured between Israel and Egypt since 1979, and with Jordan since 1994, might finally develop some warmth. A comprehensive peace would also diminish the U.S. predicament and make it much easier to defend—and perpetuate—the long alliance with the Jewish state. Muslim extremists attacking U.S. targets would lose some of their self-justification if Israel no longer was held responsible for the day-to-day affairs of nearly four million Palestinians.

On the nuclear front, an Israel that acknowledged possession of nuclear weapons would likely be able to reach a new accommodation with the United States—similar to the 2008 U.S. nuclear deal with India. Israel could participate more fully in international and regional discussions about weapons of mass destruction and perhaps signal a willingness to disarm in return for a sustained comprehensive peace. It could also make clear that it has a second-strike capability should Tehran be suicidal enough to attack Israel with nuclear weapons.

In his book, Cohen writes that:

> . . . if Israel believes that it has the right to have the bomb . . . it should find a way to say so. After sixty years, Israel should be less worried or defensive about proclaiming its rights and it should also be more forthright and honest about accepting the obligations that civilized states have accepted.[30]

In an interview, Cohen added that nuclear opacity harms Israel by conveying "a sense that there is something sinful about what you are and what you do." Fundamentally, he says the policy undermines Israeli democracy and is symptomatic of a larger crisis of identity. "Israel does not have legitimacy in terms of well-defined and agreed borders," Cohen said. "At home, there's no constitution. Basic questions such as who is a Jew are not fully defined.[31]

Of course, becoming "normal" also carries potential downsides. Further territorial withdrawals—from the West Bank or Golan Heights—could increase the threat of terrorism that has subsided in Israel proper since Israel began a strict blockade of Gaza in 2007 and built a wall through much of the West Bank. Some Palestinians and other Arabs and Muslims may never accept Israel's right to exist as a Jewish-majority state and would regard peace agreements as temporary truces on the road to a "one-state" solution that would mean Israel's extinction. Hardcore anti-Semitism will not disappear. Holocaust deniers, such as President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad of Iran, who insist that Israel should be "wiped from the pages of history," may continue to try to fuel violence by supporting rejectionist groups.

There are also domestic political reasons for avoiding a final status agreement. While a majority of Israelis consistently say they favor a two-state solution, a hard core of Israeli settlers would fight efforts to withdraw from the West Bank.

Some religious Israelis believe that redemption can only come if Israel exercises sovereignty over the entire biblical land of Israel. Journalist and peace advocate Ori Nir notes that the largest settlements in the West Bank—Betar Illit and Modi'in Illit—are populated by ultra-Orthodox families, who are a rapidly growing segment of the Israeli population. There is also the question of leadership. While Sharon had the moral authority as the architect of settlements to decide to withdraw 8000 Israelis from Gaza, it is not clear who in Israel could take on the immense challenge of removing tens of thousands of Jews from the West Bank.

Meanwhile, ending the dispute with the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza would not resolve problems related to Israel's Arab minority. In fact, it might actually exacerbate them. "Once you close the file with the Palestinians, you have opened the files with the Arab citizens of Israel," Nir says. He further stated that "From an Israeli-Arab point of view, Palestinians' acceptance of Israel as a Jewish state is a betrayal" of their aspirations for equal status. And "Once it negotiates peace with the Palestinians, Israel will have to deal with how majority-minority relations will be defined."[32]

On the nuclear front, Israel is likely to fear that transparency would increase pressure for disarmament before security threats to Israel have eased, a fear likely exacerbated by the recent NPT Review Conference document.

Implications for the United States

While much has been made of recent U.S.-Israeli diplomatic spats, U.S. administrations have periodically clashed with Israel before, including with Netanyahu when he briefly headed a government in the 1990s. During their meeting in July 2010, Obama and Netanyahu appeared to patch over disagreements, although it remains unclear how much their show of amity had to do with public relations and domestic politics. In his interview, Miller said, "I don't think we've reached a tipping point" in U.S.–Israel relations and crises, such as those over the Gaza blockade and Netanyahu's unwillingness to freeze all settlement construction, will pass.

Others have a bleaker view. Satloff, speaking before the Obama–Netanyahu summit, said "we are on the precipice of a U.S.–Israel crisis" over the peace process and Israeli settlements as well as Iran.[33] He criticized U.S. acquiescence to singling out Israel in the NPT review document and a UN Security Council statement, in the immediate aftermath of the Gaza flotilla incident, which condemned "those acts which resulted in the loss" of civilian lives.[34] The mere fact that the topic of Israel's "normality" is increasingly being discussed in both the United States and Israel suggests that the depth of the relationship is in jeopardy and that both sides will need to do more to maintain it.

It is clear that the fault does not lie with Israel alone. The Bush administration enabled Israel to avoid serious peacemaking for eight years. The Obama administration, in its eagerness to make up for that lack of progress, has made tactical errors that have deepened the rift. As of this writing, Obama has yet to visit Israel even though he has been in several Muslim-majority states including Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey.

Obama also pushed Israel too hard in public for a total ban on settlement expansion: "It was a tactical mistake in the sense that the president apparently never seriously considered the possibility that Netanyahu would say 'no,'" Ambassador Lewis said. "It was a diversion from what the president seemed to be moving toward – a helpful external initiative designed to break the negotiating logjam." Lewis added:

> What you need is persuasion with a hint of consequence undefined. Don't make highly critical statements in writing or publicly on the record that can be quoted easily. Denials never catch up. Stick to oral communication when delivering tough messages. Once it's in the newspapers, the Israeli public will side with their man.[35]

Zbigniew Brzezinski, a former national security adviser, says the Obama administration "ought to emphasize that we respect Israel's interests and security, but that the relationship is not immune to a cost-benefit analysis. Not everything Israel does do we have to endorse; not everything they do is immune to reactions derived from our own national interest."[36]

It is in the interest of both Israel and the U.S. for Israel to become a "normal" nation.

It's Time to Change

Israel faces rising external pressures that are limiting its ability to respond to perceived security threats with disproportionate military force. It must contend with a U.S. security establishment that is increasingly asking whether the special relationship with Israel is a burden at a time when the United States is fighting in Iraq as well as Afghanistan and experiencing growing anti-U.S. sentiment among large numbers of Muslims. At the same time, nuclear proliferation in the region threatens Israel's nuclear monopoly and undermines its policy of "nuclear opacity."

It is in the interest of both Israel and the United States for Israel to become a "normal" nation that no longer rules Arab-majority land or launches offensives which primarily hurt civilians. The United States can help Israel by working actively but sensitively toward peace, keeping disagreements behind the scenes to the extent possible, while Israel can help the United States by restraining itself from behavior that is increasingly difficult even for its closest ally to defend.

After all, Israel is a tiny Jewish nation in a Muslim sea whose ultimate survival depends on regional acceptance. It cannot out-kill its adversaries and the United States cannot shield it forever. Israel will have to persuade its neighbors that it can be a responsible partner in dealing with common challenges. First, however, it must persuade itself that it is in its long-term national security interests to actively seek a comprehensive peace agreement, foreswear military strikes that disproportionately hurt civilians, acknowledge its nuclear status, and thus become a normal nation.

Notes

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