

ISRAEL

AN ENDURING UNION

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The strategic partnership between the U.S. and Israel has been the object of substantial criticism over the years, and again of late. Opponents have blamed the strong ties between the U.S. and Israel for resentment of America in the Arab and Muslim worlds.¹ But the proposition that the U.S. would be better off not lending its support to Israel betrays ignorance of what the Middle East really is, and of the real causes of anti-Americanism both there and elsewhere.² In fact, negative attitudes toward the United States and the West are deeply rooted in Arab and Muslim culture, and have little to do with American aid to Israel.

Indeed, the case for supporting Israel—built around Israel’s strategic location in the region, its political stability, and its technological and military assets—is almost self-evident. Nevertheless, even self-evident truths sometimes need enunciation.

The ties that bind

Since the mid-1960s, Israel has adopted an American orientation in its foreign policy. One of the chief proponents of such a policy direction was Yitzhak Rabin, then chief of staff of the Israeli Defense Forces. For the following three decades, Rabin remained a major force in Israeli foreign policy—as prime minister (1974-77), defense minister (1984-90), and again as prime minister (1992-95)—and so did his views about the prudence of partnership



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with the United States.³ For Rabin, as well as for all of his successors, strategic coordination with Washington was of paramount importance. Prime Ministers Benjamin Netanyahu (1996-99) and Ehud Barak (1999-2001) intensively engaged the Clinton administration in trying to promote peace-making in the region. Even Prime Minister Ariel Sharon (2001-2006), long a skeptic of the merits of alliance with the U.S., quickly learned the need for strategic coordination with Washington. He and his successor, Ehud Olmert, made sure that their planned unilateral withdrawals were presented to Washington even before obtaining the approval of their own cabinets.

Israel is one of the few countries in the world that does not see U.S. primacy in international affairs as a troubling phenomenon. If anything, Israelis fear that the U.S. may succumb to isolationist impulses and as a result give up its activist posture in the Middle East and other parts of the world.

Similarly, the gradual increase in Israel's use of force, primarily against the Palestinians since September 2000, has been continuously calibrated to a level that the U.S. has been ready to tolerate, despite the fact that more muscular Israeli responses to Palestinian terrorism would have probably been more effective and less costly to all sides in the long run. (It can be argued that a more forceful response also would have better served American interests in the long run, signaling minimum tolerance of terrorist activities and demonstrating to the Palestinians the futility of the vio-

lent course of action that they have unambiguously adopted.)

Indeed, Israel reluctantly accepts its unequal status in its bilateral relations with the U.S., and is invariably sensitive to American preferences. Perhaps the best known example of this acquiescence was Israel's restraint in response to unprovoked missile strikes from Iraq during Operation Desert Storm in 1991—a decision which served to undermine Israel's deterrence.⁴ Similarly, at America's request, Israel halted diplomatic overtures to North Korea in 1994, and canceled a planned \$1 billion sale of Phalcon airborne early warning systems to China in 2000. The contours of the Gaza withdrawal in 2005 were likewise defined in the framework of Israel's initial dialogue with Washington.⁵

Bilateral relations between the two countries are occasionally marred by passing tensions stemming from differing perspectives on developments in the Middle East—and from a mismatch between Israel's regional agenda and America's global strategic calculus. Nevertheless, with the advent of the 21st century, Israel is one of the few countries in the world that does not see U.S. primacy in international affairs as a troubling phenomenon. Moreover, in contrast to much of the rest of the world, Israel is not preoccupied with how to tame American power. To the contrary, Jerusalem counts on the U.S. to fend off unbalanced European policies towards the so-called Middle East peace process, and looks to Washington for support (and compensation) for the risks it takes in attempting to make peace with its neighbors. If anything, Israelis fear that the U.S. may succumb to isolationist impulses and as a result give up its activist posture in the Middle

East and other parts of the world. The difficulties that the U.S. has faced in Iraq have reinforced such apprehensions. Simply put, the relationship with Washington has been and will continue to be a central pillar of Israel's national security orientation.

Israel's pro-American foreign policy orientation is also buttressed by cultural trends. Few societies in the world tend to consume American products of all kinds—from TV programs and films to cars and cuisine—so avidly. American sports are watched regularly in Israel. American English has penetrated Hebrew discourse, with little opposition. American politics are followed intensely with great interest and admiration, and American universities are preferred by Israelis seeking to attain higher degrees. In 2006, the United States was the top destination for Israeli tourists, while America became the largest market for Israeli exports a full decade ago. All of the above make democratic Israel the most stable and reliable ally in the region for the United States.

An overlapping strategic agenda

The alliance between Israel and the U.S. is not based on a defense treaty. Israel, in particular, has been reluctant to enter into a formal alliance, instead preferring to preserve its freedom of international action. Israeli leaders have emphasized that no American soldiers are needed to defend Israel, echoing Winston Churchill's refrain: "Give us the tools and we will finish the job." Rather, the current burgeoning strategic relationship is based on a common strategic agenda that has survived and transcended the end of the Cold War.

A preference for unipolarity

The unipolar nature of the contemporary international system where the U.S. holds a dominant position will probably end some day, when a powerful-enough competitor arises. Several major powers, including Russia, France, China and even India, eagerly await such a moment, preferring a multi-polar world where American influence is diminished and curtailed. Not so Israel. While it does not carry enough weight to make much of a difference in this calculus, Israel is highly unlikely to aid in the evolution of an anti-American alliance, either now or in the future. Jerusalem clearly prefers the current distribution of power in the international system, intuitively realizing that a competitor to American interests in the Middle East will in all likelihood seek to court the enemies of Israel. Israel also backs the American policy of limiting foreign power involvement in the Middle East, and rejects demands from European and other countries for a more active role in the peace process. In other words, *Pax Americana*, not only in the Middle East but also on the Korean peninsula and in Central Asia, seems to suit Israeli interests.

Common threats

Today, the major challenges to U.S. security—among them threats to the free flow of oil, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and Islamic terrorism—all originate in the Middle East.⁶ Deepening American involvement in the region has reflected this fact. The U.S. invaded Afghanistan in 2001 in order to root out al-Qaeda, and overthrew the regime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq two years later in order to put an end to its quest for WMD and support for anti-American forces in the region.

Similarly, although actual American policy remains in flux, Washington's antagonism toward Iran reflects the understanding that Iran's deep support for Islamic terrorism, its pursuit of WMD, and its growing regional ambitions have put it on a collision course with the U.S.

Israel clearly shares both American goals and American perceptions on these issues. Thus, although Jerusalem had considerably less enthusiasm than the U.S. about the prospects for democracy in Iraq, Israeli officials strongly supported the war against Saddam Hussein on the grounds that it removed a major strategic threat to Israel and the West. Israel also shares the American objective of resurrecting a unitary Iraqi state that can serve as a balancing force against Iran in the Gulf region. For, while Iran constitutes a major international challenge for the U.S., it represents an existential threat for Israel.⁷ And although Israel is pleased with the belated international realization that Iran's ayatollahs are after a bomb, it is skeptical that diplomacy or economic pressure can contain or end Tehran's nuclear dreams. Instead, Jerusalem, like most other capitals in the Middle East, ultimately looks to American determination to prevent the strategic nightmare of a nuclear Iran. Conversely, if Israel should find the need to undertake unilateral measures against this threat, officials in Jerusalem know that they can probably count on American indulgence and at least tacit support.

Shared concerns

Other areas of strategic commonality are also visible. Both countries are concerned about the stability of the Egyptian regime and hope for a smooth transition of power

after the death of current President Hosni Mubarak. Both also hope that Egypt will play a positive, moderating role with the Palestinians, particularly in Gaza. Another regional power whose foreign policy has elicited some alarm in Washington and Jerusalem is Turkey, which under the proto-Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP) has begun to drift away from cooperation with both countries.

Syria has become a similar point of convergence. The United States, deeply enmeshed in Iraq, has struggled with Syrian support for the insurgency there, as well as with the Assad regime's stubborn grip on Lebanon, which endures (albeit in altered form) in spite of the 2005 "Cedar Revolution." Israel, for its part, wishes to minimize the difficulties that the United States is experiencing in Iraq, and remains concerned about Syrian sponsorship of Hezbollah, Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad. The two countries also obviously compare notes on the Syrian regime and its alliance with Iran. And while so far Washington has displayed caution about exerting pressure on Damascus, if and when the U.S. government chooses to do so, Israel could prove to be a useful tool.

Consensus also exists regarding Hashemite Jordan, which is seen by both Washington and Jerusalem as a reliable ally in fighting radical Islam and Palestinian extremism. In 2003, King Abdullah displayed self-confidence and political adroitness in supporting the American invasion of Iraq (in contrast with his father's performance under similar circumstances in 1991). For its part, Israel has traditionally played an important role in providing an insurance policy to the pro-Western regime in Amman.

Even the Palestinian issue elicits much mutual understanding nowadays. Washington is inching toward Israel's minimal territorial demands by accepting the incorporation of "settlement blocs" in the final, yet to be determined, borders of Israel. The need for a security zone along the Jordan River to defend Israel (and Jordan) is also accepted by American policymakers. Moreover, despite sporadic lip service to the "roadmap" and the "two-state" paradigm by some in Washington, the current Administration has made clear that its backing for any compromise is conditional upon the emergence of a Palestinian leadership willing to live in peace with Israel and establish effective control over its territory by dismantling the myriad militias that operate there today. But since there is little chance of Palestinian society producing such a responsible leadership in the near future, the U.S. has thrown its weight behind Israel's adoption of a conflict management strategy.⁸

National security doctrine

In the post-Cold War era, there is also greater compatibility between the U.S. and Israel in terms of national security doctrine. As a superpower, the U.S. has always had great freedom of action, but this latitude has been magnified by the unipolar state of the international system. America's perceived unilateralism has garnered criticism from many corners, but Israel has not been averse to this predilection. Indeed, America's increasingly proactive strategic posture is very much in tune with Israel's own defense doctrine, which stresses self-reliance and which is skeptical of the effectiveness of multilateral action.

The U.S. also has grown closer to Israel in terms of its approach to the use of military force. In 2002, the

U.S. adopted military preemption as part of its official menu of policy options.⁹ Such action has been an integral part of Israeli strategic thinking and policy since the 1950s. In the wake of 9/11, Israel's preemptive posture, once a source of tension in the bilateral relationship, is now met with better understanding in Washington. Indeed, the dilemmas involved in combating terrorists, particularly in urban settings with large civilian populations, are no longer academic questions for the U.S.

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The gap between Washington and Jerusalem has even narrowed on a traditional area of disagreement: nuclear posture. While the U.S. was and remains committed to the 1968 Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), Israel has consistently opposed joining this international regime. To a great extent, Israel's nuclear ambiguity has helped to minimize tensions surrounding this issue. Nevertheless, the 1995 NPT Review Conference could have exacerbated relations by providing an opportunity for Egypt and its allies in the Third World to pressure the U.S. to force Israel into adherence by threatening not to support the Treaty's extension. Yet, the U.S. did not apply pressure on Israel to change its position, and by eventually securing the extension of the NPT, it actually lent legitimacy to Israel's exceptionalism on the nuclear issue.¹⁰

Strategic cooperation

Security cooperation between Israel and the U.S. goes back a long way, and much of it takes place away from the public eye. One such area is the exchange of intelligence; while American data collection capabilities are staggering, Israel itself excels in several areas, including eavesdropping and human intelligence (humint). It is a testament to Israel's security contributions to the bilateral relationship that strategic ties between the two countries have never been stronger.

On the military front, the U.S. armed forces have intensified joint training with Israeli air, sea and land units, and avail themselves of continuous access to Israeli military experience and doctrine. In particular, since the start of the War on Terror, Israel's expertise in Low Intensity Conflict (LIC) operations has been a boon to the U.S. military. So has Israel's vast combat experience and an array of weaponry specifically tailored for the situations confronting the U.S. today. Similarly, a greater American focus on homeland security has naturally intensified cooperation with Israel, a country that has coped with such threats for decades. In turn, Israeli agencies, experts, and manufacturers of equipment for counter-terror purposes have been happy to aid American efforts to improve homeland defense.

Another area of synergy is visible in the defense-industrial arena. While the U.S. dominates the global arms market in the post-Cold War era,¹¹ Israel enjoys a relative technological advantage in several niches—a superiority which American firms have capitalized upon. Moreover, most of Israel's home-made weapon systems are battle proven. Initially, Israeli firms entered into partnerships with American

companies in order to penetrate the American weapon market. But these partnerships have proven beneficial—and profitable—over the long run. Among other positive aspects, such business alliances have enabled Israel to purchase arms based on Israeli technology from the U.S. using U.S. military aid funds. And American-Israeli industrial partnerships can sell weapons to third parties, expanding export opportunities for both countries.

Yet this collaboration is not without its creative tensions. In the shrinking post-Cold War arms market, Israeli and American firms often compete fiercely—a fact that has, on occasion, injected tensions into the larger relationship between Washington and Jerusalem. The U.S. opposes unrestricted Israeli arms sales to a number of countries for political-strategic reasons. For example, in the past it has vetoed Israeli arms sales to China and Venezuela. Neither does Washington hesitate to use its international leverage to promote its own military industries at the expense of those of other countries (including Israel), though not always successfully.

A partnership preserved

Over the years, the strategic ties between Washington and Jerusalem have survived changing international circumstances and many bilateral tensions. Throughout, the U.S., unquestionably the senior partner, repeatedly has had the option of ending or scaling down the relationship. But Washington has generally understood the advantages of having close ties with Jerusalem. Perhaps Dov Zakheim, a former senior Pentagon official who has been deeply involved in the bilateral relationship, put it best in a recent interview: “On balance, if the relationship was not

in U.S. interests, it would have been diluted years ago.”¹²

Yet today, the alliance remains as vibrant as ever. The reason is clear; the Middle East is still a troubled neighborhood—one that will continue to generate sources of global instability into the foreseeable future. In confronting these challenges, the strategic bonds that bind the United States and Israel together have proven to be both useful and durable.



1. For a recent example of this phenomenon, see John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt's controversial paper on *The Israeli Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*, which is available online at <http://ksgnotes1.harvard.edu/Research/wpaper.nsf/rwp/RWP06-011>.
2. See Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit, *Occidentalism. The West in the Eyes of Its Enemies* (London: Penguin Books, 2004); Barry Rubin, "The Real Roots of Arab Anti-Americanism," *Foreign Affairs* 81, no. 6 (2002), 73-85.
3. Efraim Inbar, *Yitzhak Rabin and Israel's National Security* (Washington: Wilson Center and Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 34-57.
4. Efraim Inbar, "Israel and the Gulf War," in Andrew Bacevich and Efraim Inbar, eds., *The Gulf War of 1991 Reconsidered* (London: Frank Cass, 2002), 67-89.
5. Author's private communication with senior Israeli official, June 21, 2006.
6. See Steven David, "American Foreign Policy towards the Middle East: A Necessary Change," in Efraim Inbar, ed., *Israel's National Security in the 21st Century* (London: Routledge, 2006, forthcoming).
7. See Efraim Inbar, "The Need to Block a Nuclear Iran," *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 10, no. 1 (2006), <http://meria.idc.ac.il/journal/2006/issue1/jv10no1a7.html>.
8. For the elements of such a strategy, see Efraim Inbar, "The Palestinian Challenge," *Israel Affairs* 12, no. 4 (2006, forthcoming).
9. White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, September 2002, 6.
10. Gerald M. Steinberg, "The 1995 NPT Extension and Review Conference and the Arab-Israeli Peace Process," *Non-Proliferation*

Review 4, no. 1 (1996), 17-29.

11. Stephanie G. Neuman, "Defense Industries and Global Dependency," *Orbis* 50, no. 3 (2006), 429-451.
12. As cited in Barbara Opall-Rome, "U.S.-Israel Alliance Proves Demanding, Yet Durable," *Defense News*, May 22, 2006, 15.