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AMERICA'S SECURITY STAKE IN ISRAEL

INTRODUCTION

The United States and Israel, longstanding friends bound together by congruent national interests and shared value systems, have been engaging in increasingly close strategic cooperation. And in recent years, Israel's importance in American strategic thinking has been growing. One reason stems from the Iranian revolution, which destroyed one of the "twin pillars" of American security policy in the vital Persian Gulf region and demonstrated the political fragility of "one man, no vote" regional allies. Another reason is the hesitant Arab response to American requests for access rights for the U.S. Rapid Deployment Force following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. This reduced the perceived costs of U.S.-Israeli cooperation in terms of forgone Arab cooperation. Finally, the ominous Soviet-sponsored military buildup in Syria and the sobering American experience in Lebanon drove home the need for closer Israeli-American military coordination.

Although Washington and Jerusalem have cooperated informally for decades ad hoc, an operational framework for strategic cooperation was constructed only in 1983. Its aim is to counter the common threat posed by the Soviet Union in the Middle East, and it extends to the Arab states only when they toe the Moscow line. Both the U.S. and Israel stress the deterrent value of close cooperation. The U.S. gains a reliable regional partner, which constrains Soviet military planning in the eastern Mediterranean and Middle East. Israel gains the close support of a superpower to offset Syria's Soviet connection, which encourages Damascus to dream of a Greater Syria whose borders would include what now is Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, and parts of Turkey.

Although Israeli-American strategic cooperation falls short of a full-blown formal alliance, Israel is gradually being transformed into

a strategic anchor on the southern flank of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Israel's strategic assets include its pivotal geostrategic location (which makes it, among other things, an unsinkable aircraft carrier), its formidable military strength, and its reliable and stable pro-West political system. Israel also has much to offer the U.S. as a source of hard-earned intelligence about the combat capabilities of modern Soviet weapons systems and how to counter them.

Close Israeli-American cooperation enhances the stability of the Middle East by convincing radical Arab states that Israel cannot be dismembered by military means. This improves the prospects for a negotiated settlement to the Arab-Israeli conflict and buttresses U.S. influence in both camps.

Israel is now the largest recipient of U.S. aid, receiving this year \$1.2 billion in economic and \$1.8 billion in military assistance, plus \$750 million in emergency economic assistance. This aid should be viewed not as a handout but as one element in a web of relationships creating a critically important U.S.-Israel strategic partnership. The U.S. serves Israel's interests and Israel serves those of the U.S. Now that the relationship rests on a solid base, each partner should evaluate how the relationship's benefits could be expanded. From the U.S. perspective, this means finding ways for Israel to provide more effective support for U.S. global strategic interests.

THE REAGAN ADMINISTRATION AND ISRAEL

Ronald Reagan entered the White House as a strong supporter of Israel and a proponent of closer U.S.-Israeli relations. In 1979 he wrote: "Israel's strength derives from the reality that her affinity with the West is not dependent on the survival of an autocratic or capricious ruler. Israel has the democratic will, national cohesion, technological capacity and military fiber to stand forth as America's trusted ally."¹ Secretary of State Alexander Haig shared the President's enthusiasm for Israel and sought to include it in the anti-Soviet "strategic consensus" that he attempted to forge in the Middle East.

During his September 1981 visit to Washington, Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin proposed a military pact between the two countries. The Reagan Administration responded with a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), which both nations signed November 30, 1981. It was designed to meet the threats posed by the Soviet Union or Soviet-controlled forces introduced from outside the region. Although

1. The Washington Post, August 15, 1979.

the 1981 MOU provided for joint naval and air exercises, a framework for cooperation in military research and development, American use of Israeli medical facilities, and up to \$200 million of American purchases of Israeli military goods and services each year, it fell short of Israel's expectations. Some Israelis suspected that Americans viewed it as a political gift, perhaps to assuage Israel after the bruising October 1981 congressional battle over the proposed sale to Saudi Arabia of airborne warning and control system (AWACS) aircraft and F-15 enhancement packages. Then when the Begin government extended Israeli law to the occupied Golan Heights without consulting Washington, the Reagan Administration complained that the spirit of the MOU had been undermined. In retaliation, the U.S. suspended the agreement.

The nadir of U.S.-Israeli relations during the Reagan Administration came after the June 1982 Israeli intervention in Lebanon. While Washington accepted the limited goals initially proclaimed for Israel's operation, it could not accept the prolonged siege of West Beirut, which was under the control of the Palestine Liberation Organization. The Reagan Administration deployed U.S. Marines first as part of a multinational force (MNF) to separate the combatants and facilitate a PLO withdrawal and then in an attempt to restore order following the September 1982 assassination of Lebanese President-elect Bashir Gemayel. To preserve their neutrality in the eyes of the Lebanese, the Marines distanced themselves from the Israelis and avoided any cooperation that would mark them as occupiers rather than peacekeepers.

Despite the arms-length relationship between the Marines and the Israelis, the Marines came under increasing attack by Shiite fundamentalists and the Druze, both backed by Syria. Neither group, however, was motivated primarily by factors related to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Instead, the Shiite fundamentalists were incited by the Iranian Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's brand of Islamic fanaticism, and the Druze were motivated by a desire to improve their position in Lebanon's sectarian struggles by increasing the territory that they controlled.

The U.S. experience in Lebanon was a costly but valuable lesson for Washington. By distancing itself from Israel, the U.S. reduced pressure on Syria to withdraw from Lebanon and allowed Damascus to play off the U.S. against Israel. The May 1983 Lebanese-Israeli withdrawal agreement reduced the strains in the U.S.-Israel relationship and exposed Syria as the chief roadblock to the reconstruction of an independent Lebanon. Washington grew increasingly impatient with Syrian duplicity, disenchanted with the failure of

Saudi Arabia to deliver a promised Syrian withdrawal, and frustrated with the bloody jousting of warring Lebanese factions.² Finally the October 23, 1983, bombing of the Marine compound at Beirut airport was the catalyst for a change in American policy.

On October 29, the President signed National Security Decision Directive 111, a classified document that calls for closer cooperation with Israel. In November 1983, Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir visited Washington to discuss it with Reagan. Though the Reagan-Shamir talks did not yield a formal pact, they produced the Joint Political Military Group (JPMG), a forum for consultation about common threats posed by Moscow and its clients. The JPMG meets twice per year, or at the request of either side, to identify possible areas of cooperation and to monitor the ongoing strategic dialogue between Israeli and American officials. Subcommittees meet periodically to develop a response to military, logistical, and legal issues. Unlike the 1981 Memorandum of Understanding, which was an umbrella agreement made at the top but not taken seriously by mid-level U.S. officials, the JPMG is an institution to build cooperation from the bottom up. It is a nexus connecting the defense establishments of both countries that generates direct contacts between working-level officials familiar with the nuts and bolts issues required for practical cooperation.

Because the JPMG's activities are highly classified, little is known by the public about what it has accomplished or how it operates. The best available information was provided by Reagan at the close of his 1983 talks with Shamir. He said: "This group will give priority attention to the threat to our mutual interests posed by increased Soviet involvement in the Middle East. Among the specific areas to be considered are combined planning, joint exercises and requirements for prepositioning of U.S. equipment in Israel."³

POLITICAL DIMENSIONS OF STRATEGIC COOPERATION

Both Washington and Jerusalem are constrained by foreign policy considerations in setting the scope and nature of strategic cooperation. The U.S. is a global power with global responsibilities. It has many important strategic, political, and economic interests in the Middle East and South Asia. Washington seeks an arrangement that will strengthen the U.S. vis-a-vis the Soviet Union without undermining American influence in anti-Soviet parts of

2. See James Phillips, "Standing Firm in Lebanon," Heritage Foundation Background No. 302, October 24, 1983.

3. President's statement on the departure of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir, November 30, 1983.

the Moslem world. This means that U.S.-Israel strategic cooperation must be presented clearly as anti-Soviet, not anti-Arab.

For its part, Jerusalem seeks to neutralize the Soviet backing enjoyed by Israel's chief adversary--Syria--without unduly antagonizing Moscow. Israel naturally does not want to be drawn into a Soviet-American crisis unless its own vital interests are at stake. Confronted with the constant threat of Arab attack, it cannot afford to increase the risk of a direct clash with a superpower. The prime threats to Israel's security come from the Arab confrontational states, not from the Soviet Union. Although the Soviets arm and train many Arab armed forces, they rarely have confronted Israel with direct military force.⁴

A formal Israeli-American defense treaty has not been needed because the primary Soviet threat to American security is a secondary threat to Israel's interests and the primary Arab threats to Israeli security are secondary threats to American interests. The Israelis, in any event, are wary of a formal treaty with the U.S. because they fear that it would constrain their freedom of action in blunting regional threats. Bold actions such as the preemptive Israeli airstrikes that assured Israel's victory in the 1967 Six-Day War, the 1981 airstrike on Iraq's nuclear reactor, and the 1982 campaign to oust the Palestine Liberation Organization from Lebanon would have required extensive consultations, if not hard bargaining, with Washington. Given the press leaks plaguing many American bureaucracies, such a necessity would heighten the already great risk involved in such actions, deprive Israel of the advantage of surprise, and narrow its effective options. Some Israelis, moreover, are concerned that an anti-Soviet treaty with Washington could complicate efforts to ease the plight of 400,000 Soviet Jews who have been unable to emigrate.

Both countries thus prefer low-key, low-profile strategic cooperation to a full-fledged defense treaty. Yet strategic cooperation also may create major problems. A common criticism is that close Israeli-American strategic cooperation precludes Arab-American strategic cooperation. This of course overlooks the historical record that Arab states have refrained from close cooperation with Washington even when the U.S. has held Israel at arms length. Inter-Arab rivalries, xenophobia, acute sensitivity to foreign military presences spawned by bitter experiences with Turkish, British, and French empires, and an exaggerated adherence to the shibboleth of nonalignment have diluted Arab willingness to cooperate openly with the U.S. on defense matters. The lesson is that shunning Israel would not earn Washington the close cooperation of Arab

4. See: James Phillips, "As Israel and the Arabs Battle, Moscow Collects the Dividends," Heritage Foundation Background No. 291, September 20, 1983.

states. The Arab-Israeli conflict is not the only issue, nor necessarily the most important issue, in determining the closeness of bilateral Arab-American relations.

Paradoxically, Washington's ties to Israel have been an incentive for Arab leaders to improve relations with the U.S. Egypt's late President, Anwar Sadat, launched a rapprochement with the U.S. in part because he believed that Washington's influence with Israel gave it "99 percent of the cards" in any peace process. Jordan's King Hussein also has benefited from Washington's close ties to Israel, particularly in 1970 when, with U.S. and Israeli help, he rebuffed a Syrian-Palestinian challenge to his throne. Arab-American and Israeli-American strategic cooperation are not necessarily mutually exclusive because both are targeted at the Soviet Union and its regional allies. For this reason, Washington is right to seek strategic cooperation with such Arab states as Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Oman, among others.

Another criticism of Israeli-American strategic cooperation is that such cooperation would damage Washington's standing as a mediator between the Arabs and Israel. This danger could be minimized by reaffirmations of U.S. commitment to the 1982 Reagan peace initiative that called for self-government for the West Bank in association with Jordan. To shun cooperation with Israel, moreover, would harm the peace process enormously by encouraging Arab states, which reject negotiations, to cling to the chimera of a military solution in the mistaken belief that Washington might abandon Israel at some point in the future. On the other hand, close cooperation with Israel furthers the peace process by building trust between Israel and the U.S., making it easier for a secure Israel to risk territorial concessions in return for peace.

THE BENEFITS OF MILITARY COOPERATION

Medical Cooperation

The JPMG initially addressed the least controversial and complex issues, such as the medical field. The U.S. sought and gained access to Israeli medical facilities in the event of a crisis. This would reduce greatly the time needed to evacuate wounded American servicemen to modern hospitals. In a full-scale U.S.-Soviet clash in the Middle East, for example, estimated U.S. casualties would create a need for 17,000 hospital beds.⁵ In June 1984 the U.S. and Israel staged their first joint exercise--a medical evacuation to practice the

5. Christopher Madison, "Reagan Links Middle East Dispute to Global East-West Struggle," National Journal, January 28, 1984, p. 162.

transportation of casualties from Sixth Fleet ships to Israeli hospitals. Cooperation in the medical field also includes the pre-positioning of U.S. medical supplies in Israel and exchange visits of American and Israeli doctors.

Military Cooperation in the Eastern Mediterranean

Washington has shown interest in Israeli help in possible air and sea battles with Soviet forces in the eastern Mediterranean. The growing strength of the Soviet Navy and declining political reliability of Premier Andreas Papandreu's anti-American regime in Greece has increased the importance of Israeli cooperation in this vital area. Israel, meanwhile, depends on Mediterranean routes for virtually all exports and imports. The Israeli Air Force has had extensive combat experience over the Mediterranean and could play a dominant role in the area south of Turkey and east of Crete.

A U.S. Navy study reportedly has concluded that Israel's Air Force alone could destroy the entire Soviet Fleet in the eastern Mediterranean.⁶ By one estimate, Israel could launch 20 times as many air attack sorties as an aircraft carrier air wing or 12 times as many air combat sorties.⁷ Even if only 10 percent of the Israeli Air Force were committed to sea control missions, Israel could project more air power than could a U.S. carrier in the eastern Mediterranean. The Sixth Fleet itself rarely deploys more than two carriers at once in the entire Mediterranean.

The small Israeli Navy, meanwhile, is a modern force comprised of fast missile boats that pack considerable punch. Operating under Israeli air cover, the Israeli Navy could challenge Soviet naval forces up to three hundred miles from Israel's coast. To test this, in December 1984, Israel and the United States conducted joint anti-submarine warfare exercises. Given the large Soviet submarine fleet and Israel's limited experience in anti-submarine warfare, this is a promising area for cooperation.

Even if Israel sits out a military conflict with the Soviet Union, Jerusalem could make a major difference in the outcome by permitting U.S. warplanes to use Israeli air bases. This would extend the strategic depth of NATO's southern flank and help counterbalance Soviet access to Syrian and Libyan airbases.

6. Citation of ABC News Report in Wolf Blitzer, Between Washington and Jerusalem (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 76.

7. W. Seth Carus, Israel and the U.S. Navy, AIPAC Papers on U.S.-Israel Relations, Washington, D.C., 1983, p. 9.

Israel offers other benefits to the U.S. Navy. For one thing, U.S. Navy fighter bombers can use Israel's bomb range in the Negev desert. For another, the U.S. Navy now makes an average of two port visits per month at the Israeli ports of Haifa, Ashdod, and Eilat. Although warships of the Sixth Fleet did not begin visiting Israel until 1977, Haifa has become an important source of fresh food for the U.S. Navy. Israeli harbors are now favorite ports for American sailors. Indeed, with the recent terrorist attacks on U.S. servicemen in Europe, Israel is one of the few places where uniformed Americans on shore leave do not have to fear terrorist attacks.

Another promising area for cooperation lies in Israeli maintenance of U.S. Navy vessels. Haifa offers dockyard and repair facilities that easily could be expanded to accommodate many classes of American ships. Aside from the greater flexibility and effective fighting strength that this would give the Sixth Fleet, the use of Israeli repair yards would strengthen American bargaining leverage over Greece. If Papandreou carries out his threats to terminate U.S. access to Greek naval bases in 1988, then Israel, along with Turkey, could replace the Greek bases.

Persian Gulf Contingencies

Jerusalem would play more of a role in eastern Mediterranean than in Persian Gulf contingencies. But in the event of a U.S.-Soviet clash in the Persian Gulf area, Israel could provide air cover for U.S. troops being airlifted on the initial leg of their journey, probably to Egypt. Given the lack of long-range American fighter escorts, an Israeli air umbrella would free U.S. tanker planes and fighters that would otherwise be needed to protect defenseless air transports.

Israel also could serve as a depot for pre-positioned U.S. ammunition, fuel, and weapons. By storing such heavy war material 6,000 miles closer to the prospective front, the U.S. could reduce significantly the Herculean logistical task of airlifting combat units to the Gulf theatre. These pre-positioned supplies could be flown to Egypt or some other Arab staging area, to be married to American troops arriving from the United States. While pre-positioned stocks also should be dispersed prudently in friendly Arab states, it would be unwise for Washington to concentrate them in any one Arab state, given the political volatility of many Arab governments and the limited capability of some Arab states to provide security against Soviet air attack and commando operations.

Israel offers other advantages as a pre-positioning site. The Israelis have developed a "dry storage" technique that enables them to store sophisticated weaponry indefinitely in airtight containment vessels without any degradation in performance. Israel's pivotal location also would enable it to provide pre-positioned supplies to a

swing force assembled for NATO contingencies, one of the many ways that Israel could enhance the strategic depth of NATO's southern flank.

The strongest argument against using Israel as a pre-position site is that Persian Gulf states may not accept assistance facilitated, however indirectly, by Israel. But if the U.S. quietly stores supplies in Israel without publicly admitting it, Persian Gulf governments would not be forced to rule out such assistance in advance. Even if domestic political pressures should force American friends in the Persian Gulf to decline such assistance publicly, there is often a wide discrepancy between what governments do in a crisis and what they say in peacetime. Finally, if Persian Gulf states are adamantly opposed to pre-positioning U.S. supplies in Israel, they always have the option of enlarging the scope of their own strategic cooperation with the U.S. to diminish their dependence on Israeli cooperation in a crisis. Having made American security planning more difficult by denying the U.S. local bases, Arab Gulf states cannot expect to dictate to Washington as to the source of American assistance.

Military Intelligence

The U.S. has been able to study the military lessons of the Arab-Israeli wars to glean information that may improve U.S. security. For two decades, Israel has fielded a modern military force equipped with state-of-the-art weapons to face Arab forces increasingly equipped with sophisticated Soviet weapons. Periodic Arab-Israeli clashes have made the Middle East the prime combat proving ground for Soviet and American military technology. Over time, Israel has gained extensive experience in defeating Soviet weaponry, countering Soviet tactics, improving American weaponry, and devising its own combat doctrines. The U.S. military has profited immensely from Israel's hard-earned combat experience in the past and should work to take full advantage of Israel's military expertise in the future.

Following each of its wars, Israel has made available to the Pentagon invaluable data on the performance capabilities, technical specifications, and electronics components of Soviet weapons encountered on the battlefield. Israel has provided intelligence bonanzas in the form of captured Soviet-made tanks, electronic equipment salvaged from the remains of Soviet-made warplanes, and even an entire Soviet radar station captured during the 1969-1970 war of attrition. Israel also provided the U.S. access to an intact MiG-21 delivered by a defecting Iraqi pilot. In many cases these Soviet-made weapons never before had been subject to detailed Western inspection.

Israel has contributed significantly to the evolution of U.S. military tactics. Following the 1967 war, the Israelis passed on

information on the Soviet high-altitude SAM-2 anti-aircraft missile, which enabled U.S. pilots to survive missile barrages over North Vietnam.⁸ Israel later passed on intelligence on the low-altitude SAM-6 missile after the 1973 war and on other SAM systems after the 1982 war in Lebanon. Israeli experience has led to the decreased use of searchlights on tanks; the increased reliance on thermal sights for nightfighting; the greater use of tanks and armored personnel carriers in mixed formations; improvements in command, control, and communications between air, land, and sea units; the provision of electronic warfare capabilities to reconnaissance units; and improved aerial electronic countermeasures.⁹

In addition to influencing Western tactical doctrines, Israeli-supplied military intelligence has affected the evolution of American military technology. A joint Israeli-American analysis conducted after the 1973 war generated eight volumes of 200 to 300 pages each that affected the development of American weapons systems and eventually the U.S. defense budget.¹⁰ The 1982 war in Lebanon yielded substantial electronic intelligence on Soviet SAM missile systems and information on the vulnerabilities of T-72 tanks that may spark the creation of new military tactics and technologies to defeat these threats.

Technical Cooperation

Israel has improved American weapons to increase their combat capabilities, survivability, and endurance. The Israelis have made 114 modifications of U.S. M-48 and M-60 tanks, many of which were adopted later by the U.S. Modifications also have been made to the A-4, F-4, F-15, and F-16 warplanes, M-113A armored personnel carriers, and M-109 self-propelled artillery. In 1975, Israelis discovered defects in U.S.-made armor-piercing ammunition and alerted the Pentagon, leading to changes in U.S. manufacturing procedures.¹¹

Israel also has been a source of innovation in developing and applying new military technologies. The Israelis have been pioneers in fielding Remotely Piloted Vehicles (RPVs) to reconnoiter and strike heavily defended targets. The U.S. Navy has purchased the Israeli

8. The New York Times, September 5, 1982.

9. Steven Spiegel, "Israel as a Strategic Asset," Commentary, June 1983, p. 55.

10. The New York Times, March 13, 1983.

11. Steven Spiegel, "The Defense Benefits of the U.S. Relationship with Israel," unpublished paper, 1985, pp. 10-15.

Mastiff RPV and has initiated a joint program with Israel to develop another RPV.¹² Israeli companies also have contracted to provide components for the SMAW-B-300 rocket launcher for the Marines, heavy duty air filters for U.S. helicopters, and an engineering vehicle for the Army Corps of Engineers.

In May 1986 Israel also became the third U.S. ally to join the research activities for the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI). Israel's expertise in lasers, computer software, and command and control technologies are promising areas for bilateral cooperation in developing strategic defenses.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Washington should integrate Israel discreetly into the global anti-Soviet defense system to strengthen deterrence of the Soviet Union in the strategic area between NATO's southern flank and the Persian Gulf. Joint contingency plans should be drawn up secretly to keep Moscow and its regional allies guessing about the extent to which Israel is willing to commit itself to containing Soviet aggression in a crisis. The eastern Mediterranean region should be the focus of such joint contingency planning because Israel's vital interests and greatest capabilities vis-a-vis the Soviets are centered there.

The U.S. should seek access to Israeli air bases on a contingency basis. The Sixth Fleet should increase its use of Israeli ports and naval repair facilities to augment its flexibility and reduce its dependence on problematic Greek bases. Naval and air exercises should be held regularly to familiarize U.S. and Israeli naval and air forces with each other and enhance teamwork in the event of a crisis.

U.S. medicine, fuel, ammunition, and weapons should be secretly pre-positioned in Israel to facilitate rapid movement to the Persian Gulf or NATO's southern flank if needed. An active Israeli role in Persian Gulf contingencies should be minimized to ease Arab anxieties about Israeli involvement and Israeli anxieties about being drawn into conflicts in areas outside the bounds of its vital interests. On the other hand, active Israeli support of U.S. efforts to help Freedom Fighters in Central America and Africa would be a powerful demonstration to the American public of Israel's status as a special ally.

Military intelligence liaison and technical cooperation should be organized to promote the maximum degree of cross-pollination in the joint assessment and countering of the Soviet military threat.

12. Aviation Week and Space Technology, January 13, 1986.

Israeli innovation in military technology should be adopted when practicable, including potential Israeli contributions to the Strategic Defense Initiative. In the Gramm-Rudman era, increased cooperation with Israel offers a cost-effective way to enhance the effectiveness of the American military establishment.

CONCLUSION

Israeli-American strategic cooperation is not a panacea that will blunt all Soviet threats in the Middle East, but without it, the world will be a more dangerous place. Such cooperation deters the aggressive action of Moscow and its regional clients, encourages Arab states to opt for a negotiated settlement rather than military action in the Arab-Israeli conflict, and strengthens NATO's southern flank. Israel has much to offer the U.S. in terms of military intelligence, technical innovation, access to air bases and naval facilities, and a pre-positioning site for fuel, medicine, ammunition, and weapons. Washington should work closely yet discreetly with Israel in order to transcend the zero-sum nature of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

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