

America and Israel After Sixty Years

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Sixty years after the founding of Israel, America and the Jewish state maintain a close and unique relationship. Americans, for the most part, tend to accept this as something natural and long-standing. Foreign observers, however, do not always comprehend the nature of this connection, its durability, and the deep-seated continuities on which it rests. [1] Some are merely puzzled or curious, others may reach for far-fetched explanations or – in worst cases – embrace sinister conspiracy theories in order to account for this special bond.

To understand the basis of the relationship it is necessary to appreciate the uniqueness of Israel, the particular characteristics of the United States, and the manner in which these traditions and legacies interact. The creation of Israel in 1948, reborn after some 2000 years, represented an extraordinary accomplishment for a people who had somehow sustained religious and communal identity through the ages and who had managed to survive and overcome centuries of dispersion, oppression and powerlessness as well as the ultimate horrors of the Holocaust. Their achievement constituted not only a remarkable historical and human saga, but one that harked back to the origins of the Old and New Testament and engaged the imagination and sympathy of many non-Jews.

For their part, the American founders saw themselves as creating a country free of the heavy burdens of the European past and that would be ‘a light unto the nations’ or, in the words of the Massachusetts Puritan leader, John Winthrop, in 1630, a ‘city upon a hill.’ Both expressions were drawn from Hebrew Bible references to Jerusalem and reflected aspirations for America to become a ‘New Jerusalem.’ Alexis de Tocqueville, writing in the 1830s, described how American society differed from its European counterparts and the way in which a ‘nonconformist’ Protestant religious tradition reinforced the country’s sense of mission and identity. In the past century as well as more recent times, this sense of exceptionalism with its legacy of religiosity, liberalism and special purpose, can be found in the language of many presidents: Woodrow Wilson’s democratic idealism, Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s four freedoms, Harry S. Truman’s words in introducing the doctrine that would bear his name, John F. Kennedy’s inaugural address, and remarkably

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similar expressions of purpose and belief in the speeches of Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton and George W. Bush.

These religious and historical inheritances are not the exclusive basis for the U.S.-Israeli connection, but in subtle ways they bind the two countries. The unique national origins of both Israel and the United States contribute to a relationship between the two countries that is both special and different from the kinds of international interactions commonly discussed among certain scholars, diplomats and foreign policymakers. As a result those observers who insist on narrowly conceived definitions of national interest may wrongly assume that a relationship different from what their own deductive logic demands must be due to faulty strategy, lack of understanding, or even some nefarious cause. In reality, however, the intimate Israeli-U.S. bond results from a complex combination of past and present history, national interest, public opinion, shared values, and religious beliefs.

I. Origins of the Special Relationship

Israel was by no means a creation of the United States, and at the time of its founding leading American diplomats tended to be unsympathetic. President Harry S. Truman ultimately overcame the objections of the State and Defense Departments and of Secretary of State George C. Marshall, and made the historic decision to recognize Israel. The U.S. decision was announced moments after Israel's own declaration of its independence on May 14, 1948, and was followed immediately by Soviet recognition. Truman himself was well read and had a keen historical sense. Reflecting on his role, he later remarked, 'I am Cyrus,' invoking the name of the Persian King who had liberated Jews from their Babylonian exile some 2500 years earlier.

In its early years Israel received only limited American support and the relationship between the two countries developed quite slowly. Despite Truman's historic decision, the U.S. did not initially lift an arms embargo, and Israel's request for an urgently needed loan was stalled for eight months by bureaucratic delays. In 1952 the U.S. did provide its first real economic aid, amounting to \$86 million. However the Eisenhower administration, which took office in 1953, was quite cool toward the Jewish state, pushing for a peace plan that Israel saw as jeopardizing its security and then engaging in forceful arm-twisting to secure Israel's withdrawal from the Sinai Peninsula after the 1956 war with Egypt.

During its first two decades, to the extent that Israel enjoyed a special relationship with another country, it was less with the United States than with France. Leaders in Paris and Jerusalem regarded Egyptian President Nasser and his promotion of Arab nationalism as a serious threat. They collaborated with Britain in the October 1956 Suez crisis and war, and France provided the original technology for Israel's nascent nuclear program. Though President Charles De Gaulle broke with Israel and tilted toward the Arab states at the time of the June 1967 Six Day War, Israel was armed mostly with French weapons when it achieved its stunning victory.

American policy shifted only gradually toward a more favourable approach, beginning with the July 1958 Middle East crisis. After the pro-Western monarchy of Iraq was overthrown, Israel allowed use of its airspace and provided other support for American and British efforts to stabilize the situation in Jordan and Lebanon. For the administration of President Eisenhower and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, Israel became a significant regional asset in the face of increasing Arab nationalism and Soviet pressure. [2] The relationship grew closer in 1962 with the Kennedy administration's decision to sell Hawk anti-aircraft missiles to Israel in order to counter-balance Soviet arms flowing to Egypt and Syria. This collaboration notably intensified after the 1967 War and even more so after the Yom Kippur War of October 1973. The provision of arms and foreign aid increased markedly during these years and enjoyed broad public and congressional support. Moreover, during the Cold War decades of the 1960s, 70s and 80s, Israel proved to be a significant source of foreign intelligence and of captured Soviet weapons, tactics, and military technology.

II. Peace Process: Achievements and Limits

The Egyptian-Israeli Peace Treaty, signed at the White House in March 1979, exemplified just how important the American role in the Middle East and the bond with Israel had become. President Anwar Sadat of Egypt, who had come to office after Nasser's death in 1970, broke with his Russian patron after the October 1973 War and established close ties with the United States. From 1977 onward, Washington played a crucial role in helping to bridge Egyptian and Israeli differences. President Jimmy Carter presided over key negotiations resulting in the Camp David Accords in September 1978, and with the support of Congress his administration provided large amounts of economic and military aid to Israel and Egypt as a means of insuring implementation of the Peace Treaty. For Israel, this meant assurances that its security would not be jeopardized and that the costs

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of relocating bases from the Sinai Peninsula could be offset. For Egypt, there was major economic aid plus re-equipping of its armed forces with American weapons.

Paradoxically, the close relationship between America and Israel meant that only the United States could serve as the indispensable intermediary in the region. This was not only because of its position as the leading external power in the Middle East, but also because of its credibility and importance to Israel. No other country or international organization was in a position to undertake such a role. Russia, Britain and France as the former colonial powers, the European Union, and the UN could at times play contributory roles, but none possessed these key capacities.

With the end of the Cold War, the relative strategic importance of Israel for the United States appeared to lessen, but the close ties between the two countries remained undiminished. The ongoing centrality of the American role continued to be evident in every significant crisis and negotiation. For example, the elder Bush administration's 1990-91 response to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, culminating in Operation Desert Storm, led to the historic Arab-Israeli Madrid Conference of October 1991. Less than two years later, in September 1993, President Bill Clinton presided over the signing of the Oslo Agreement between Israel and the Palestinians on the White House lawn. During the following year, the Israeli-Jordanian Peace Treaty of October 1994 was based on an agreement reached in Washington three months earlier, and the treaty itself was signed not only by Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and King Hussein, but also by President Clinton. Disengagement agreements between Israel and the Palestinian Authority in the mid-1990s involved a key U.S. role, as did intense (though ultimately unsuccessful) efforts to broker peace between Israel and Syria and between Israeli and the Palestinians in 1999-2000. President George W. Bush's June 2002 speech offered explicit support for the creation of a Palestinian state, while requiring that the Palestinians first abandon terrorism and select a new leadership not compromised by corruption, repression and autocracy. And both the subsequent 'Roadmap' for peace developed in coordination with the EU, Russia, the UN (the Quartet), as well as the Annapolis Conference of November 2007 aimed at relaunching the peace effort and seeking to advance a framework for final status negotiations, took place under largely American aegis.

III. Domestic Dimensions

For the United States, the bond with Israel is a product of multiple factors. American exceptionalism provides an important dimension of sentiment and

belief. The Judeo-Christian heritage takes on added importance here, as seen in the enormous support for Israel by tens of millions of evangelical Protestants. Indeed, they far outnumber the 2 percent of the American population who are Jewish. History is vital too. The indelible memory of the Holocaust and the development of ties over sixty years provide another source of support and affinity, as does the fact that Israel is a democracy and an ally of the United States. Support for Israel in the U.S. Congress remains deep and bipartisan, and has shown no evidence of diminishing. Both Jewish and non-Jewish political groups have played an active role in the political process (though in the case of the 'Israel Lobby' this has been much exaggerated), and where they are effective it is because they advocate policies that are consistent with national beliefs and largely supported by public and elite opinion.

Throughout the 1990s, despite the end of the Cold War, support for Israel among elites and the wider public remained consistent. [3] Recent American opinion continues to be strongly sympathetic, and the ups and downs of the peace process, war and terrorism, the rise and fall of Labor and Likud governments, and changes in the Arab world have had relatively little effect. Asked to list the countries with which they feel most sympathetic, Americans rank Israel behind only Canada, the UK, Germany and Japan, and ahead of France and India. [4] Between two-thirds and three-quarters of Americans continue to regard Israel as an important ally. In addition, the public typically supports Israel over the Palestinians by margins of four to one or even more, for example during the August 2006 war in Lebanon, by 52 percent versus 11 percent, [5] and in a March 2008 poll by a record 71 percent versus 8 percent. [6] And despite increasing criticism on the political left, substantial majorities of Democrats as well as Republicans continue to report positive views.

During the 2008 Presidential campaign, almost all the candidates have adopted strongly pro-Israel positions. The only exceptions were on the outer flanks of each party: Dennis Kucinich, a left wing Democrat, and Ron Paul, a right-wing libertarian Republican. Both favoured foreign policies of retreat and disengagement, and neither emerged as a serious contender. Meanwhile, the leading contenders, John McCain, Barak Obama and Hillary Clinton, advocated strong and unequivocal support for Israel.

IV. Implications

The fact that peace efforts during the past decade have been largely unsuccessful illustrates both the necessity of the American role but also its limits. Over the years, virtually every significant agreement between Israel and its Arab adversaries has involved the United States in some essential capacity, as intermediary, supporter, guarantor or source of legitimacy. Yet any durable peace requires that the parties themselves be prepared and willing to end the conflict. Despite often repeated urging from Europe and the Middle East, what the United States cannot do is impose peace, and when it has put forward proposals that do not gain Israel's consent, the result has been stalemate. Cases include, for example, the 1969 Rogers Plan, a 1977 Carter administration idea for multilateral talks in Geneva (rejected by Egypt as well as Israel), a 1982 Reagan Plan, and a 1989 proposal by Secretary of State James Baker.

To be sure, both sides to the conflict need to be held to their commitments, and the United States, along with others, is in a position to support the transparency and reciprocity that are essential for any lasting agreement. Yet the tragedy of recent years, and especially since the 1993 Oslo Agreement, is that the Palestinians have been unwilling to abandon the conflict, halt virulent incitement, and drop their maximalist and unattainable demands.

By contrast, the majority of Israelis have come to terms with the idea that peace will require relinquishing most of the West Bank with only limited border adjustments, accommodation for Palestinians in Jerusalem, and acceptance of a Palestinian state. In essence, Israeli opinion is dynamic, not static. When presented with a credible and unambiguous partner for peace (Anwar Sadat, King Hussein), Israel's public and its political system have been willing and able to respond decisively. However, in the face of security threats, suicide terrorism, and the absence of a partner able and willing to negotiate and deliver a genuine peace, Israelis will not make significant concessions. As a case in point, consider the consequences of Israel's withdrawal from southern Lebanon in May 2000 and from Gaza in October 2005. In the former case, this resulted in Hezbollah's turning the area into a heavily armed enclave with thousands of Iranian and Syrian supplied rockets targeted against Israel. Ultimately, Hezbollah's actions there triggered the July-August 2006 war. In the case of Gaza, the firing of short range Qassem and more recently longer range Grad rockets into Israel has continued virtually without interruption since Israel removed 7000 settlers and relinquished the territory to Palestinian control. The Hamas takeover of Gaza in June 2007 put the area under the domination of

a movement committed to the most fanatical anti-Jewish and anti-Israel policies. For the majority of Israelis, these cases discredit the concept of land-for-peace and are likely to do so until a Palestinian leadership emerges that has the capacity to speak authoritatively for its entire community, to monopolize means of legitimate violence among its people (the political test long ago described by Max Weber), and to be unambiguous in its willingness to end the conflict.

V. Foreign Perceptions

Outside the United States, the character of the US-Israeli bond often is poorly understood. But even those who do appreciate the depth and breadth of this relationship can misconstrue its policy consequences. America's role as well as its influence with Israel is unique. Yet the achievement of a much-desired peace is not a matter of the United States pressuring Israel or imposing a settlement. Not only is there little domestic support for such a policy, but even if there were, it would neither provide a viable solution nor be accepted by the Israelis themselves. Thus foreign leaders could have greater and more positive effect by using their political and economic leverage to encourage the necessary changes among the Palestinians as well as to make clear that outsiders cannot impose a peace. The surrounding Arab states, themselves affected by the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, also need to provide much more decisive diplomatic, political, and economic support for peace than they have been willing to offer in the past.

Two additional points are worth emphasizing. First, there is no way to accommodate the demands of radical Islamists and extremist Palestinian and Arab groups. No amount of concessions will meet their ultimate objective, which remains the destruction of Israel. Wishful thinking has been common in the recent past, and even under Yasir Arafat's corrupt and duplicitous leadership, western audiences were all too often willing to take his protestations at face value while ignoring his actions and his contradictory words to Arab audiences. The second point is that even the disappearance of Israel would not greatly lessen the problem of Middle East regional instability. As Josef Joffe has observed, even in a 'World without Israel,' Sunni-Shia conflicts, state to state rivalries, bitter differences between modernists and reactionaries, despotism, radical Islamism, and political oppression would guarantee the continuation or intensification of conflict. [7] One can add to this list the disruptive regional role of Iran and the ongoing violence within Iraq. To be sure, a viable peace involving Israel, the Palestinians and Syria is greatly to be

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desired, but it will not be achieved through misunderstanding the American role or the ultimate nature of the U.S.-Israeli relationship.

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Notes

- [1] For an earlier treatment of this relationship, see Robert J. Lieber, 'U.S.-Israeli Relations Since 1948,' in Robert O. Freedman (ed.), *Israel's First Fifty years* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000.)
- [2] See in particular the insightful account of this episode by Abraham Ben-Zvi, *Decade of Transition: Eisenhower, Kennedy, and the Origins of the American-Israel Alliance* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1998.)
- [3] See, e.g., John F. Riley (ed.), *American Public Opinion and U.S. Foreign Policy*, (Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, 1995), pp. 20 and 26.
- [4] Gallup polling data cited in Yitzhak Benhorin, 'Poll: More Americans are pro-Israeli,' Ynetnews.com, March 6, 2008.
- [5] Jonah Newman, 'Survey: Americans See Israel as Ally,' JerusalemPost.com, November 18, 2007.
- [6] Poll by Public Opinion Strategies and Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, commissioned by The Israel Project, March 31, 2008, <http://www.theisraelproject.org/site/apps/nlnet/content2.aspx?c=hsJPK0PIJpH&b=689705&ct=5155819>. See also Robert Mabry, 'A Six-Day War: Its Aftermath in American Public Opinion,' Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, May 30, 2007.
- [7] Josef Joffe, 'A World Without Israel,' *Foreign Policy* (Jan/Feb 2005): 36-42.