

ISRAEL

A Strategic Asset for the United States

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a strategic asset

A STRATEGIC ASSET

Israel is a small country in a strategically vital—and increasingly inhospitable—region of the world. It is not surprising that doubts over the wisdom of the United States’ close relationship with Israel periodically surface. Such concerns may emerge even more frequently as the Middle East passes through a period of great political volatility and change. As we consider the justifications for strong U.S. support of Israel in the current context, this essay argues that in addition to powerful reasons of values and morality, the Jewish state provides significant benefits to the United States and its national interests.

This aspect of the relationship is too often ignored. Over the decades, American leaders have primarily explained the foundations of the U.S.-Israel relationship by properly citing “shared values”: the two countries’ common democracy, mutual experience in fighting for freedom, roots in Judeo-Christian culture and civilization, and commitment to the right of nations, large or small, to live in security while manifesting the will of the people. But unlike the formulations that U.S. leaders use concerning other

countries with which the United States has shared cultural and political values—e.g., Britain and France—arguments in favor of strong ties with Israel usually also include a second profound rationale for the depth of the relationship: the moral responsibility America bears to protect the small nation-state of the Jewish people. Together, these two concepts—shared values and moral responsibility—have been the pillars on which the United States has built a unique bilateral relationship with Israel that enjoys the deep, long-standing support of the American people, bilateral ties commonly described by a broad, bipartisan consensus of U.S. political leaders as “unbreakable.”

While accurate and indispensably important, this characterization of the core basis of the U.S.-Israel relationship is incomplete because it fails to capture a third, crucial aspect: common national interests and collaborative action to advance

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those interests. Shared values and moral responsibility remain unshakable foundations of those ties, but the relationship stands equally on this underappreciated third leg.

For some, this is a controversial assertion. Within the U.S. foreign policy, defense, and business communities, some leaders and analysts have traditionally viewed the U.S. relationship with Israel primarily as a one-way street, in which the United States protects Israel diplomatically and provides the means for Israel to defend itself militarily but Israel itself contributes little or nothing to American national interests.

We reject that analysis. To the contrary, we believe that the United States and Israel have an impressive list of common national interests; that Israeli actions make substantial direct contributions

to these U.S. interests; and that wise policymakers and people concerned with U.S. foreign policy, while never forgetting the irreplaceable values and moral responsibility dimensions of the bilateral relationship, should recognize the benefits Israel provides for U.S. national interests.

COMMON NATIONAL INTERESTS

As a global power, the United States has national interests that range far beyond the greater Middle East, but that region is among the most critical for our country. U.S. interests that especially involve this vast area include:

- preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, especially nuclear weapons;
- combating terrorism and the radical Islamist ideology from which it is spawned;
- promoting an orderly process of democratic change and economic development in the region;
- opposing the spread of Iranian influence and that of Iran's partners and proxies;
- ensuring the free flow of oil and gas at reasonable prices;

- resolving the Arab-Israeli dispute through a process of negotiations; and
- protecting the security of Israel.

Israel's national interests are virtually identical:

- to prevent nuclear proliferation, especially by Iran or via terrorist groups;
- to fight terrorism, radicalism, and what Israelis refer to as “global jihad”;
- to promote stability and the long-term development of liberal democracies in the greater Middle East; and
- to maintain peaceful borders with its neighbors, including a peace agreement with the Palestinians based on a two-state solution.

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On important issues, Washington and Jerusalem do sometimes differ, a phenomenon not unique to the U.S.-Israel relationship, as witness just three of the many examples where the United States parted ways with its closest treaty allies: with Britain and France, during the 1956 Suez crisis; with Britain and France, when they secretly connived to slow or prevent the unification of Germany in 1990; or with France and Germany, when they opposed the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. The United States

and Israel may ascribe different levels of threat to the challenges they face, accept varying degrees of risk in addressing those threats, and disagree on ways to advance their common national interests. Over the decades, the two sides have periodically had policy flare-ups, some even bitter, on topics ranging from Israel's preemptive action against Iraq's nuclear reactor to Israeli sales of weaponry and military technology to China. Some of the most contentious policy disputes have been about actions affecting the peace process—the diplomacy aimed at resolving the many different aspects of the Arab-Israel conflict.

More frequent are those instances when the two sides have worked together successfully over more than thirty years to achieve shared policy objectives.

From the Ford administration's punitive "reassessment" of relations to the George H.W. Bush administration's showdown over loan guarantees, when various U.S. presidents and Israeli governments have staked out different positions on key issues (notably, the wisdom and legitimacy of Israeli settlement construction), the disputes unsurprisingly capture the headlines. But more frequent are those instances when the two sides have worked together successfully over more than thirty years to achieve shared policy objectives, especially the series of peace treaties and agreements that have been an anchor of U.S. influence in the region.

This list also includes instances when Israel subordinated its own policy preferences to accommodate those of Washington, such as acceding to the George W. Bush administration's insistence that the Palestinians hold legislative elections in 2006, despite Israeli misgivings—which regrettably proved prescient—that it risked triggering a destructive process that eventually led to the Hamas takeover of Gaza. Through it all, decades of experi-

ence show that the two sides have learned how to manage their differences in the service of their common national interests. This commonality of interest has long been the dominant theme of the U.S.-Israel bilateral relationship, even on the difficult issue of Israel's relations with its Arab neighbors.

israeli contributions

ISRAELI CONTRIBUTIONS TO U.S. NATIONAL INTERESTS

In addition to and outside of the peace process, history provides numerous examples of specific Israeli actions that have benefited U.S. national interests.

During the Cold War, the most celebrated were Israel's daring theft of Soviet radar from Egypt in 1969, Israel's positive reply to President Nixon's request to fly reconnaissance missions and mobilize troops to help turn around Syria's invasion of Jordan in 1970, and Israel's sharing of technical intelligence on numerous Soviet weapons systems captured during the 1967 and 1973 wars. More recently, Israeli counterproliferation efforts—including bombing the Iraqi nuclear reactor in 1981—have contributed substantially to U.S. interests. And the 2007 attack on the North Korea-supplied Syrian reactor, never formally acknowledged by Israel, ensured that Bashar al-Asad's progress toward a nuclear weapon—and a very dangerous proliferation move by North Korea—was stopped at an early stage.

On a number of occasions, Israel has also made difficult decisions not to act—policy choices sometimes made in discordance with its own strictly national interests and perspectives—and that restraint has been important to U.S. national interests. Such was the case with Israel’s decision to accede to a U.S. request not to retaliate against Iraqi Scud attacks during the first Gulf War, which American officials feared would lead to Arab states withdrawing from the international coalition. Similarly, after a sometimes ugly dispute with Washington, Israel agreed to terminate the sale of problematic weapons and military technology to China and deprive itself of both a major market for its world-class military exports and a source of influence with Beijing.

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Today, Israeli contributions to U.S. national interests range across a broad spectrum. For example:

- Through joint training and exercises as well as exchanges on military doctrine, the United States has benefited in the areas of counterterrorism cooperation, tactical intelligence, and experience in urban warfare. The largest-ever U.S.-Israel joint exercise is scheduled for spring 2012.
- Israeli technology promotes American interests. Increasingly, U.S. homeland security and military agencies are turning to Israeli technology to solve some of their most vexing technical problems. This support ranges from advice and expertise on behavioral screening techniques for airport security to acquiring an Israeli-produced tactical radar system to enhance force protection. Israel has been a world leader

in the development of unmanned aerial systems, for both intelligence collection and combat, and it has shared with the U.S. military the technology, the doctrine, and its experience regarding these systems. Israel is also a global pacesetter in active measures for armored vehicle protection, defense against short-range rocket threats, and the techniques and procedures of robotics, all of which it has shared with the United States.

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- In the vital realm of missile defense cooperation, the United States has a broad and multifaceted relationship with Israel, its most sophisticated and experienced partner in this preeminent domain for the United States. Israel's national missile defenses—including the U.S. deployment in Israel of an advanced X-band radar system and the more than 100 American military personnel who man it—will be an integral part of a larger missile defense architecture spanning Europe, the Eastern Mediterranean, and the Persian Gulf that will help protect U.S. forces and allies throughout this vast area. For this reason, the director of the Pentagon's Missile Defense Agency recently praised the specific contribution that Israel's integrated, multilayered command-and-control network makes to the U.S. military's ability to defend against the Iranian missile threat.
- While it is certainly true that Israel gains significantly from generous U.S. financial assistance to its military—most of it spent in America—Israel's defense industries have certain unique competencies that benefit the United States. One re-

sult is the growing importance to the U.S. military of Israeli defense goods, as the United States has taken advantage of access to unique Israeli capabilities in key “niche” areas of military technology. Overall, the value of annual U.S. purchases of Israeli defense articles has increased steadily over the past decade, from less than a half billion dollars in the early 2000s to about \$1.5 billion today. Among the Israeli-developed defense equipment used by the U.S. military are short-range unmanned aircraft systems that have seen service in Iraq and Afghanistan; targeting pods on hundreds of Air Force, Navy, and Marine strike aircraft; a revolutionary helmet-mounted sight that is standard in nearly all frontline Air Force and Navy fighter aircraft; lifesaving armor installed in thousands of MRAP armored vehicles used in Iraq and Afghanistan; and a gun system for close-in defense of naval vessels against terrorist dinghies and small-boat swarms. Moreover, American and Israeli companies are working together to jointly produce Israel’s Iron Dome—the world’s first combat-proven counter-rocket system.

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- Counterterrorism and intelligence cooperation is deep and extensive, with the United States and Israel working to advance their common interest in defeating the terrorism of Hamas, Hizballah, and al-Qaeda and its affiliate groups by sharing information, supporting preventive actions, deterring challenges, and coordinating overall strategy. Joint Special Forces training and exercises, collaboration on shared targets, and close cooperation among the relevant U.S. and Israeli security agencies testify to the value of this relationship.

- More broadly, Israel is a full partner in intelligence operations that benefit both countries, such as efforts to interdict the supply of parts to Iran's nuclear program or to prevent weapons smuggling in the Red Sea and the Mediterranean. This intimate relationship reinforces overall U.S. intelligence efforts by providing Washington with access to Israel's unique set of capabilities for collection and assessments on key countries and issues in the region, since Israel is able to focus resources and attention on certain targets of central importance to the United States. Such was the case, for example, when Israel passed to the United States conclusive photographic evidence that Syria, with North Korean assistance, had made enormous strides toward "going hot" with a plutonium-producing reactor. As Israel's strategic intelligence collection capabilities (e.g., satellite and unmanned aerial systems) mature and improve, this cooperation and exchange of intelligence information and analysis will increasingly serve U.S. national interests.

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- Given that Iran and its allies in the greater Middle East represent clear and present dangers to U.S. interests, Israel's military—the most powerful in the region—plays an important role in addressing those threats posed especially by Syria, Hizballah, and to some extent, Iran itself. The ability of the Israeli armed forces to deter the military ambitions of destabilizing regional actors promotes American national interests because it presents our common enemies with an additional—and potent—military capability to resist their aggression.

- Looking to the future, Israel’s world-class expertise in two cutting-edge areas of national security—cyber defense and national resilience planning and implementation—will increasingly redound to the benefit of the United States. Israel is a primary place where the United States can build an enduring partnership to try to secure the cyber commons, as enunciated in the administration’s *International Strategy for Cyberspace*. With its world-class information technology, R&D, and cybersecurity capabilities, Israel will be an

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ever more important player in efforts to secure cyberspace and to protect critical U.S. national infrastructure from cyberattack. Through the Israel-based activities of major U.S. companies or the licensing in the United States of Israeli technologies, Israel’s excellence in cybersecurity already benefits critical U.S. infrastructure such as banking, communications, utilities, transportation, and general Internet connectivity. And if security concerns of both parties can be managed, Israel can become a major partner in efforts to exploit the military applications of cyberpower, in the same way that the two countries have established collaborative relationships in intelligence and counterterrorism. Finally, drawing on its experience in building a flourishing economy and vibrant democracy despite decades of conflict and terrorism, Israel has a role to play in helping the United States deepen its own internal resilience in dealing with terrorist threats against the homeland and the impact of natural disasters.

In a political context, it is important to note that Israel—unlike other Middle Eastern countries whose governments are partners with the United States—is already a stable democracy, which will not be swept aside by sudden uprising or explosive revolution, a fact that may become more important in the turbulent period ahead. Moreover, for all our periodic squabbles, Israel’s people and politicians have a deeply entrenched pro-American outlook that is uniformly popular with the Israeli people. Thus, Israel’s support of U.S. national interests is woven tightly into the fabric of Israeli

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democratic political culture, a crucial characteristic that is presently not found in any other nation in the greater Middle East.

We do not argue that Israel’s assistance to the United States is more valuable to the United States than American support of Israel is to Israel. Nor do we deny that there are costs to the United States, in the Arab world and elsewhere, for its support of Israel, as there are costs to U.S. support of other beleaguered—and sometime imperfect—friends, from West Berlin in the Cold War to Kuwait in 1990-91 to Taiwan today. We are, however, convinced that in a net assessment those real costs are markedly outweighed by the many ways in which Israel bolsters U.S. national interests and the benefits that Israel provides to those interests.

In particular, we believe that the United States can have strong and productive relations with Arab and other Muslim nations while sustaining its intimate collaboration with Israel and that U.S. support for Israel is not the primary—and probably not even a dominant—reason Islamist terrorists target the United States. The long-standing U.S. commitment to Israel has not prevented development of close ties with Arab nations who understand that

however much they disagree with U.S. support for Israel, they benefit from a good relationship with the United States on other issues. Nor has it made the Arab oil-exporting states any less conscious of their own economic and strategic interest in a reasonably stable flow of oil to world markets, or their eagerness to buy first-class military equipment from the United States or to enjoy the benefits of U.S. protection against Iranian or other aggression.

To put it differently, would Saudi Arabia's policies toward the United States be markedly different in practice if Washington entered into a sustained crisis with Israel over the Palestine issue during which the bilateral relationship went into steep systemic decline? Would Riyadh lower the price of oil? Would it stop hedging its regional bets concerning U.S. attempts to coerce Iran into freezing its nuclear weapons programs? Would it regard current U.S. policy toward Afghanistan more positively? Would it view American democracy promotion in the Middle East more favorably? Would it be more inclined to reform its internal governmental processes to be more in line with U.S. preferences? We judge positive answers to all these questions as "doubtful" at the very least.

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Moreover, for all the "Arab street's" popular attacks on the United States as Israel's friend, America remains a magnet for young Arabs—in popular culture, in education, in commerce, and in technology. And concern with Israel, though real, remains a lower priority in most of Arab public opinion than more immediate preoccupations with economic progress and pervasive corruption.

toward deeper TOWARD DEEPER U.S.-ISRAEL COOPERATION

The conclusion of our analysis is that the U.S.-Israel relationship is a significant asset to U.S. national interests. And the potential for even greater U.S. benefits from deeper cooperation is substantial.

In this context:

- U.S. political leaders, from the White House to Congress, should expand the national discussion on U.S. Middle East policy to include the role of the U.S.-Israel relationship as a strategic asset to U.S. national interests. “U.S. national interests” deserve equal billing with “shared values” and “moral responsibility” as fundamental rationales for the bilateral relationship.
- The U.S. government should seek to maximize the advantages the United States can derive from cooperation with Israel and to expand partnerships both in traditional areas (e.g.,

military, intelligence) and in new areas (e.g., cyberwarfare, homeland resilience).

- U.S. security, strategy, and policy communities should more seriously engage on the strategic aspects of the U.S.-Israel relationship: how to further develop bilateral ties and how to leverage this relationship to advance broader U.S. national interests.

Taken together, these measures will ensure that U.S.-Israel relations are seen not only as a diplomatic vehicle to express deep-seated values and fulfill America's moral responsibility, but also as an important means to advance U.S. national interests.

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