

# ISRAEL: ASSET OR LIABILITY?

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A Debate on the Value of the U.S.-Israel Relationship

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Front cover: Israeli and American flags fly as Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates arrives in Tel Aviv, Israel, April 2007. (Department of Defense Photo/Cherie A. Thurlby). Photograph of Robert Satloff by Stan Barouh for The Washington Institute (also on pages 3 and 23). Photograph of Chas Freeman from the *Washington Times* (also on pages 11 and 22).

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## IS ISRAEL AN ASSET OR LIABILITY TO THE UNITED STATES?

In boardrooms and classrooms alike, this question has emerged as a focus of intense debate over the direction of U.S. policy in the Middle East. It is fundamental; it goes to the heart of U.S. interests. If Israel is judged a net asset to the United States, then the U.S.-Israel partnership is established in a firm foundation that cannot be shaken by passing political fashion. If Israel is judged a net liability to the United States, then advocates of close U.S.-Israel ties will have an increasingly difficult time making their case to the policy community and in the court of public opinion.

In July 2010, the Nixon Center—a Washington-based research institute—hosted a debate on this issue that has since reverberated around the country and around the world. Participants were Dr. Robert Satloff, executive director of The Washington Institute and its Howard P. Berkowitz Chair in U.S. Middle East policy, and Ambassador Chas Freeman, former U.S. ambassador to Saudi Arabia and assistant secretary of defense in the Clinton administration.

This special publication includes prepared remarks by both debaters, their rebuttals, and their back-and-forth exchanges. We believe that publishing the full text of the debate will help clarify this vital issue—and with analytical clarity comes sound policy.

The full debate can be viewed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sj7cDZoZagA>



**“IT IS TO AMERICA’S ADVANTAGE TO HAVE A NATION OF FRIENDS, WHOSE PEOPLE AND GOVERNMENT ARE FIRM SUPPORTERS OF AND ADVOCATES FOR AMERICAN INTERESTS IN THE BROADER MIDDLE EAST.”**

# NOT JUST A STRATEGIC ASSET, BUT A STRATEGIC BONANZA

*Prepared Remarks by Dr. Robert Satloff*

Thank you for the invitation to participate in today's event. I have known Chas Freeman, a fellow native of Rhode Island, for many years. I believe we first met when I interviewed with him for a deputy assistant secretary's job when he served in the Pentagon in the early days of the Clinton administration. I then hosted him several years later as a speaker at a Washington Institute conference, in spring of 2002. He was then, as I assume he will be today, his provocative self.

I did have some reluctance in agreeing to speak at this event. After all, I asked myself, why should I lend legitimacy to a question—"Israel: asset or liability?"—on which the overwhelming majority of Americans agree; on which the vast majority of strategists of both major parties agree; and on which the vast majority of military leaders and national security specialists agree, across the political spectrum? Today's question bounces around a lot in the blogosphere, but, I am authoritatively told, not in the Situation Room. Still, it's out there—perhaps on the fringes, but perhaps not only there—and it sometimes rears its head in ugly and even anti-Semitic ways. So, I thought—why not? A case as strong as this one deserves the light of day.

And there is a certain appropriateness in having it heard at the Nixon Center. Richard Nixon, as this room surely knows, was no romantic. And he was certainly no philo-Semite. But he was the first American president to recognize the strategic value of Israel to U.S. national interests. As President Nixon once said, "I am supporting Israel because it is in the interest of the U.S. to do so." Even Professors Stephen Walt and John Mearsheimer, authors of *The Israel Lobby*, whom you won't hear me quote approvingly very often, cite Israel as a U.S. strategic asset during those Nixon years:

By serving as America's proxy after the Six Day War, Israel helped contain Soviet expansion in the region and inflicted humiliating defeats on Soviet clients like Egypt and Syria. Israel occasionally helped protect other U.S. allies (like Jordan's King Hussein), and its military prowess forced Moscow to spend more backing its losing clients. Israel also gave the United States useful intelligence about Soviet capabilities.

All of that is an understatement, of course, but it underscores why this place—more than most other institutions—should have a natural inclination to recognize the strategic value of the U.S.-Israel relationship.



ROBERT SATLOFF

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My task today is to make the case why Israel—and the U.S.-Israel relationship—is a strategic asset to the United States. In fact, I will go even further. I will argue that Israel, and the U.S.-Israel relationship, is—both in objective terms and compared to any other Middle East relationship we have—a strategic bonanza to the United States. Not just an asset, but a bargain.

Let me make these points:

- It is to America's advantage to have a nation of friends, whose people and government are firm supporters of and advocates for American interests in the broader Middle East. I don't think there is anyone in this room who would disagree with the contention that there is no country in the Middle East whose people and government are so closely aligned with the United States; in some countries, the people are pro-American, in others, the government, but in Israel, it is unabashedly both. Our two countries share ways of governing, ways of ordering society, ways of viewing the role of liberty and individual rights, and ways to defend those ideals. Some realists tend to dismiss this soft stuff as having no strategic value; I disagree. This commonality of culture and values is at the heart of national interest; it manifests itself in many ways, from how Israel votes at the United Nations to how its people view their role as being on the front line against many of the same threats we face.
- It is to America's advantage to have in Israel an economy that is so closely associated with ours and that is such an innovator in the information and technology field, in high-tech medicine, and in green technologies like the electric car. The Obama administration made the economic health and well-being of the United States the pillar of its National Security Strategy. Our partnership with Israel is a clear asset in this regard—not only does Israel's fiscal responsibility (a situation that contrasts with other U.S. allies in Europe) mean that Israel is not part of this problem, but with its high-tech

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economy, Israel is actually part of the solution. Indeed, the strength of our relationship helped turn Israel from an economic basket case into an economic powerhouse—and our economic partner. Just ask Warren Buffett and all the other American investors who view Israel as a destination worthy of their capital.

- It is to America's advantage to have had a close working partnership with Israel for the last thirty-plus years in the pursuit of Middle East peace. Some bemoan the peace process as "all process, no peace" and critique the strength of the U.S.-Israel relationship as an impediment to progress, not an ingredient of it. I disagree. First, I would argue that a strong Israel, with a strong U.S.-Israel relationship at its core,

has been central to what we know as the peace process. And second, in historical terms, the Middle East peace process has been one of the most successful U.S. diplomatic initiatives of the last half-century.

In the words of one knowledgeable observer: “The peace process has been a vehicle for American influence throughout the broad Middle Eastern region. It has provided an excuse for Arab declarations of friendship with the United States, even if Americans remain devoted to Israel. In other words, it has helped to eliminate what otherwise might be seen as a zero-sum game.”

That sort of praiseworthy peace process was born out of the 1973 war, when two interlocking developments began to emerge—the growth of the bilateral U.S.-Israel strategic relationship, which took off in economic and military terms, and the emergence of a peace process in its current, American-led form. Since then, the Arab-Israeli arena has changed dramatically in favor of U.S. interests. Over the past thirty years, we have seen peace agreements between Israel and the most powerful Arab state (Egypt) and the state with the longest border with Israel (Jordan). We have also seen thirty-seven years of quiet on the Syrian border and seventeen years of diplomacy between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization. That is also a huge and positive difference.

Indeed, during the first twenty-five years after the establishment of Israel, the regional situation could be described as continuous war with periodic outbursts of diplomacy. The second thirty-five years—the period since 1973, the period since the takeoff in U.S.-Israel strategic relations—can be described as continuous diplomacy with periodic outbursts of war. Since 1973, there has not been a regional war or a state-to-state conflict in the Arab-Israeli arena. We have had limited wars—Israel versus Hizballah, for example—but nothing that engulfed the region. That’s a huge and positive difference.

I say all this because we tend to forget the context—the fear of regional war—that dominated the Arab-Israeli arena for years. For more than thirty-six years, it hasn’t happened. Of course, it may happen again—there is always that fear—and the circumstances on Israel’s northern border may be leading in that direction. But let’s look at what we know: The peace process over the last thirty-five years has essentially evolved into a process to resolve issues between Israel and the Palestinians. These issues are difficult, complex, and highly emotional. The failure to resolve them can lead to bloodshed and violence between Israelis and Palestinians, as we saw in the second intifada. But despite all those ups and downs, it has never reverted to regional war.

Indeed, one of the great achievements of U.S.-Israel cooperation, manifested through the two states’ partnership in the peace process, is to have reduced the Arab-Israeli conflict to an Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Look at the experience of the second intifada, for example: approximately 4,000 Palestinians and 1,000 Israelis dead in the worst outburst of intercommunal violence since 1948. Despite this, the peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan survived and not one Arab state intervened to provide military support to the Palestinians; in fact, the only state to lend military support to the Palestinians was Iran.

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I forgot to mention that the observer I referred to earlier as praising the peace process for eliminating the zero-sum game of Middle East politics—a peace process whose oxygen is the strength and vitality of the U.S.-Israel relationship—was Chas Freeman.

And then there is the long list of military-related advantages that Israel brings to the United States directly, by its own actions and through the bilateral relationship. I will cite just a few:

- Since 1983, American and Israeli militaries have engaged in contingency planning, and Israeli facilities can be made available to the United States if needed. American forces have practiced at many Israeli facilities, ranging from Ben Gurion Airport to prepositioning sites. All four U.S. armed services routinely conduct training at Israel Defense Forces facilities.
- The United States has deployed an X-band early warning radar for missile defense on Israeli soil. This facility supplements other American missile defense assets and is available for both America's regional missile defense architecture and our own reconfigured missile defense concept for protecting Europe from longer-range Iranian missiles.
- America began stocking war reserves in Israel fifteen years ago. Those stockpiles are hardly "minimal"—the total value is approaching \$1 billion. They're U.S. property, and the Pentagon can draw upon them at any time. America has shown it is able to move military supplies from Israel to the Gulf; for example, it sent Israeli mine plows and bulldozers to Iraq during the first Gulf War in 1991.
- Israel can be an extremely useful location for strategic logistics or power projection in the eastern Mediterranean, and in fact the U.S. Navy has conducted countless port visits in Haifa in support of U.S. operations.

- Israel has proven to be a prime source of effective counterterrorism/counterinsurgency tactics, techniques, and procedures, which have played a significant role in U.S. success (thus far) in Iraq.
- Israel has also been an outstanding innovator in the technology, tactics, techniques, and procedures of unmanned aerial vehicles, which the United States now relies upon so extensively in Afghanistan.

Add all this up: Israel—through its intelligence, its technology, and the lessons learned from its own experience in counterterrorism and asymmetric warfare—has saved American lives. And when you factor in Israel's unique counterproliferation efforts—destroying nuclear reactors in Iraq (1981) and Syria (2007)—Israel's contribution to our security is even greater.

Bottom line: do a cost-benefit analysis of the U.S. relationship with Israel over the past thirty-plus years and the U.S. relationship with its Arab friends in the Gulf. What do you find? To secure its interests in the Arab-Israeli arena, the United States has spent about \$100 billion in military and economic assistance to Israel, plus another \$30 billion to Egypt and relatively small change to others. Our losses: a total of 258 Americans in the Beirut embassy and barracks bombings and a few other American victims of terrorism in that part of the Middle East. On a state-to-state basis, as I have argued, that investment has paid off handsomely in terms of regional stability.

**"OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH ISRAEL HELPED PRODUCE A STRATEGIC BONANZA FOR THE UNITED STATES AT BARGAIN PRICES."**

Compare that with the Gulf. Look at the massive costs we have endured to ensure our interests there, principally to secure access to the region's energy resources at reasonable prices. The United States has spent more than \$1 trillion—\$700 billion on the Iraq war alone, according to the Congressional Budget Office—lost more than 4,400 U.S. servicemen, fought two wars, endured thirty years of conflict with the Islamic Republic of Iran, and faced a global al-Qaeda insurgency fed originally by our deployment of troops in Saudi Arabia. After all that, the Gulf region is still anything but secure. It's when you boil it down to this very simple arithmetic that I can say that our relationship with Israel helped produce a strategic bonanza for the United States at bargain prices.

**"I LOOK FORWARD TO DISCUSSING ALL THE EXAMPLES OF CASES WHERE AMERICA'S RELATIONSHIP WITH ISRAEL HAS PROVEN AN OBSTACLE TO ARAB GOVERNMENT COOPERATION... HINT: THE REAL ANSWER IS LESS THAN ZERO."**



Is it a fairy-tale marriage? Of course not. Do the two sides have differences, even profound ones, on some critical issues? Absolutely. Do certain Israeli actions run against the tactical advice and preference of various U.S. administrations? To be sure. But their common recognition of the strategic benefits they derive from this relationship has given the United States and Israel strong incentive to manage these differences fairly amicably over the years.

What about the argument that all this has come at a huge strategic price? Well, I can only say that I am glad we are at the Nixon Center because, at least here, true realists will see through the haze and see the world as it really is. Specifically:

- I look forward to discussing all the examples of cases where cooperation with an Arab country in the realm of counterterrorism, missile defense, Iran, Iraq, maritime security, or nonproliferation was significantly hindered by our relationship with Israel. Hint: the answer is at or close to zero.
- I look forward to discussing all the examples of cases where U.S. ties to Israel were a factor either in politics in Iraq and Afghanistan or in our ability to operate in those two countries. Hint: a senior U.S. diplomat resident in Baghdad explained to me recently how many times the issue of Israel even came up in the Iraqi election campaign this year, namely, zero.
- I look forward to discussing all the examples of cases where America's relationship with Israel has proven an obstacle to Arab government cooperation with the United States on measures to prevent Iran from achieving a military nuclear capability—in other words, all those substantive measures that Arab states tell the United States they would take to tighten the noose on Iran's nuclear weapons program but refuse to take because of the U.S. relationship with Israel. Hint: the real answer is less than zero. Arab states are aching for early and ef-

fective U.S. action against the Iranian nuclear program at least as much as Israel is.

- And, of course, I look forward to discussing all the examples of cases of Arab boycott of sale of oil to America or America's allies as a result of U.S. friendship toward Israel. After all, isn't that the usual critique, that our friendship with Israel threatens our access to the free flow of oil at reasonable prices? The fact of history is that ever since the United States began to build a strategic relationship with Israel—the past thirty-five years—there have been no such boycotts.

So, given the long list of advantages we derive from our relationship with Israel, to make the liability case, I expect to hear an even longer and much more specific and detailed list of items where that relationship has impeded our ability to advance our interests on all these issues.

I know it is de rigueur to cite Gen. David Petraeus on this issue. But please look closely at what



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General Petraeus actually said in his fifty-six-page prepared testimony to the Armed Services Committee. In the section of his remarks titled "Cross-Cutting Challenges to Security and Stability," he cited eleven different items. The entire list bears mention: militant Islamic networks; proliferation of weapons of mass destruction; ungoverned spaces; terrorist finance and facilitation; piracy; ethnic, tribal, and sectarian rivalries; disputed territories and access to vital resources; criminal activity; uneven economic development and unemployment; lack of regional and global economic integration; and, of course, insufficient progress toward a comprehensive Middle East peace. Would U.S. interests be advanced if there were comprehensive peace? Of course. Who argues to the contrary? But General Petraeus blamed neither Israel nor the U.S.-Israel relationship for the lack of such progress; nor did he even hint that this issue is somehow the key to overcome the other ten major obstacles that he outlined.

So that we can save ourselves precious time, I am perfectly willing to stipulate the following: Arab leaders like to harangue U.S. presidents, U.S. ambassadors, U.S. special envoys, and even U.S. generals about Israel. I don't think we need to have a debate about that. The point in contention is whether their harangues have much strategic import. In other words, does Arab action match Arab talk. Instinctively, we all know that it doesn't; until recently, we just lacked the data to support it.

Thanks to outstanding research by my Institute colleague David Pollock, who crunched the numbers on a half-dozen indicators of U.S.-Arab relations for twenty Arab states over a ten-year period, we now have the data. And the results are crystal clear—the key principle is "watch what we do, not what we say." And, importantly, this applies both to Arab governments and to Arab publics. Except for episodic and passing moments, like the period around the spring 2003 U.S. attack on Saddam's Iraq, and notwithstanding public opinion poll data to the contrary, the actual, measurable trajectory of U.S.-Arab relations—travel,

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education, trade, security relations, etc.—has been consistently up.

And then there’s the argument about the United States paying for Islamist recruitment because of its relationship with Israel. Again, in an echo of the long list of factors said by Petraeus to pose challenges to security and stability, radical Islamists also have a long list of complaints against America, of which U.S.-Israel relations is only one among many and not nearly the most important.

In the early days of this conflict, when Usama bin Laden was first declaring war on “Crusaders and Jews,” the main target was U.S. forces in Saudi Arabia; more recently, as attempted Times Square bomber Faisal Shahzad declared in court, the major complaint was U.S. drone attacks in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Palestine is usually mentioned, but hardly ever as the headline; and, as my colleague Matt Levitt has pointed out, al-Qaeda rarely places such a high priority on fighting Israel that it actually targets Israel or Israelis. Remember—to both Salafists and Shiite radicals alike, America is the “Great Satan”; Israel is only the “Lesser Satan.” They hate us, our values, our pluralism, our culture. Israel is just a small part of that story. This isn’t just Rob Satloff’s view. Read the 9-11 Commission Report. That’s their view, too.

If you think bin Laden is all about Israel, and not about America, let me quote a very learned fellow:

Mr. bin Laden’s principal point, in pursuing this campaign of violence against the United States, has nothing to do with Israel. It has to do with the American military presence in Saudi Arabia, in connection with the Iran-Iraq issue. No doubt the question of American relations with Israel adds to the emotional heat of his opposition and adds to his appeal in the region. But this is not his main point.

That very smart fellow was Chas Freeman.

Bottom line: a disinterested, professional net assessment of the impact of Israel and the U.S.-Israel relationship on U.S. strategic interests in the Middle East would show that the 63 percent of Americans who told the most recent Gallup poll that they sympathize with Israel—more than four times the percentage who sympathize with what the poll presented as the other side, Palestinians (I didn’t like the wording, but it’s their poll, not mine)—that those 63 percent are pretty good strategists. They know that our relationship with Israel is not just good for Israel, it’s good for America.

In fact, I am tempted to say that what we really need in the Middle East are more “Israels”—not more Jewish states, of course, but more strong, reliable, democratic, pro-American allies. It would certainly be nice to have one or two in the Gulf. The absence of those sorts of allies is precisely what has gotten us into such deep trouble over the past thirty years. We’ve had allies whom we have sold weapons worth billions and billions of dollars but who can’t patrol their own borders; who can’t secure the free flow of oil; who can’t take care of themselves without relying on the U.S. cavalry to come to the rescue. In a room of realists, this lesson should be clear: what we should really want as allies are countries that, with a strong America behind them, can take care of themselves and project our basic values in the process. In other words, we could use a couple more countries like Israel.



**“THERE ARE MANY REASONS FOR AMERICANS TO WISH THE JEWISH STATE WELL. UNDER CURRENT CIRCUMSTANCES, STRATEGIC ADVANTAGE FOR THE UNITED STATES IS NOT ONE OF THEM.”**

# WHAT'S IN IT FOR AMERICA?

*Prepared remarks by Ambassador Chas Freeman*

Is Israel a strategic asset or liability for the United States? Interesting question. We must thank the Nixon Center for asking it. In my view, there are many reasons for Americans to wish the Jewish state well. Under current circumstances, strategic advantage for the United States is not one of them. If we were to reverse the question, however, and to ask whether the United States is a strategic asset or liability for Israel, there would be no doubt about the answer.

American taxpayers fund between 20 and 25 percent of Israel's defense budget (depending on how you calculate this). Twenty-six percent of the \$3 billion in military aid we grant to the Jewish state each year is spent in Israel on Israeli defense products. Uniquely, Israeli companies are treated like American companies for purposes of U.S. defense procurement. Thanks to congressional earmarks, we also often pay half the costs of special Israeli research and development projects, even when—as in the case of defense against very short-range unguided missiles—the technology being developed is essentially irrelevant to our own military requirements. In short, in many ways, American taxpayers fund jobs in Israel's military industries that could have gone to our own workers and companies. Meanwhile, Israel gets pretty much whatever it wants in terms of our top-of-the-line weapons systems, and we pick up the tab.

Identifiable U.S. government subsidies to Israel total over \$140 billion since 1949. This makes Israel by far the largest recipient of American giveaways since World War II. The total would be much higher if aid to Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and support for Palestinians in refugee camps and the Occupied Territories were included. These programs have complex purposes but are justified in large measure in terms of their contribution to the security of the Jewish state.

Per capita income in Israel is now about \$37,000—on a par with the United Kingdom. Israel is nonetheless the largest recipient of U.S. foreign assistance, accounting for well over a fifth of it. Annual U.S. government transfers run at well over \$500 per Israeli, not counting the costs of tax breaks for private donations and loans that aren't available to any other foreign country.

These military and economic benefits are not the end of the story. The American government also works hard to shield Israel from the international political and legal consequences of its policies and actions in the Occupied Territories, against its neighbors, or—most recently—on



CHAS FREEMAN

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the high seas. The nearly forty vetoes the United States has cast to protect Israel in the UN Security Council are the tip of the iceberg. We have blocked a vastly larger number of potentially damaging reactions to Israeli behavior by the international community. The political costs to the United States internationally of having to spend our political capital in this way are huge.

Where Israel has no diplomatic relations, U.S. diplomats routinely make its case for it. As I know from personal experience (having been thanked by the then-government of Israel for my successful efforts on Israel's behalf in Africa), the U.S. government has been a consistent promoter and often the funder of various forms of Israeli programs of cooperation with other countries. It matters also that America—along with a very few other countries—has remained morally committed to the Jewish experiment with a state in the Middle East. Many more Jews live in America than in Israel.

Resolute American support should be an important offset to the disquiet about current trends that has led over 20 percent of Israelis to emigrate, many of them to the United States, where Jews enjoy unprecedented security and prosperity.

Clearly, Israel gets a great deal from us. Yet it's pretty much taboo in the United States to ask

what's in it for Americans. I can't imagine why. Still, the question I've been asked to address today is just that: what's in it—and not in it—for us to do all these things for Israel.

We need to begin by recognizing that our relationship with Israel has never been driven by strategic reasoning. It began with President Truman overruling his strategic and military advisors in deference to personal sentiment and political expediency. We had an arms embargo on Israel until Lyndon Johnson dropped it in 1964 in explicit return for Jewish financial support for his campaign against Barry Goldwater. In 1973, for reasons peculiar to the Cold War, we had to come to the rescue of Israel as it battled Egypt. The resulting Arab oil embargo cost us dearly. And then there's all the time we've put into the perpetually ineffectual and now long defunct "peace process."

Still, the U.S.-Israel relationship has had strategic consequences. There is no reason to doubt the consistent testimony of the architects of major acts of anti-American terrorism about what motivates them to attack us. In the words of Khaled Shaikh Muhammad, who is credited with masterminding the 9/11 attacks, their purpose was to focus "the American people... on the atrocities that America is committing by supporting Israel against the Palestinian people." As Usama bin Laden, purporting to speak for the world's Muslims, has said again and again: "we have... stated many times, for more than two-and-a-half decades, that the cause of our disagreement with you is your support to your Israeli allies who occupy our land of Palestine." Some substantial portion of the many lives and the trillions of dollars we have so far expended in our escalating conflict with the Islamic world must be apportioned to the costs of our relationship with Israel.

It's useful to recall what we generally expect allies and strategic partners to do for us. In Europe, Asia, and elsewhere in the Middle East, they provide bases and support the projection of American power beyond their borders. They join

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us on the battlefield in places like Kuwait and Afghanistan or underwrite the costs of our military operations. They help recruit others to our coalitions. They coordinate their foreign aid with ours. Many defray the costs of our use of their facilities with “host nation support” that reduces the costs of our military operations from and through their territory. They store weapons for our troops’, rather than their own troops’, use. They pay cash for the weapons we transfer to them.

Israel does none of these things and shows no interest in doing them. Perhaps it can’t. It is so estranged from everyone else in the Middle East that no neighboring country will accept flight plans that originate in or transit it. Israel is therefore useless in terms of support for American power projection. It has no allies other than us. It has developed no friends. Israeli participation in our military operations would preclude the cooperation of many others. Meanwhile, Israel has become accustomed to living on the American military dole. The notion that Israeli taxpayers might help defray the expense of U.S. military or foreign assistance operations, even those undertaken at Israel’s behest, would be greeted with astonishment in Israel and incredulity on Capitol Hill.

Military aid to Israel is sometimes justified by the notion of Israel as a test bed for new weapons systems and operational concepts. But no one can identify a program of military research and development in Israel that was initially proposed by our men and women in uniform. All originated with Israel or members of Congress acting on its behalf. Moreover, what Israel makes, it sells not just to the United States but to China, India, and other major arms markets. It feels no obligation to take U.S. interests into account when it transfers weapons and technology to third countries and does so only under duress.

Meanwhile, it’s been decades since Israel’s air force faced another in the air. It has come to specialize in bombing civilian infrastructure and militias with no air defenses. There is not

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much for the U.S. Air Force to learn from that. Similarly, the Israeli navy confronts no real naval threat. Its experience in interdicting infiltrators, fishermen, and humanitarian aid flotillas is not a model for the U.S. Navy to study. Israel’s army, however, has had lessons to impart. Now in its fifth decade of occupation duty, it has developed techniques of pacification, interrogation, assassination, and drone attack that inspired U.S. operations in Falluja, Abu Ghraib, Somalia, Yemen, and Waziristan.

Recently, Israel has begun to deploy various forms of remote-controlled robotic guns. These enable operatives at faraway video screens summarily to execute anyone they view as suspicious. Such risk-free means of culling hostile populations could conceivably come in handy in some future American military operation, but I hope not. I have a lot of trouble squaring the philosophy they

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embody with the values Americans traditionally aspired to exemplify.

It is sometimes said that, to its credit, Israel does not ask the United States to fight its battles for it; it just wants the money and weapons to fight them on its own. Leave aside the question of whether Israel's battles are or should also be America's. It is no longer true that Israel does not ask us to fight for it. The fact that prominent American apologists for Israel were the most energetic promoters of the U.S. invasion of Iraq does not, of course, prove that Israel was the instigator of that grievous misadventure. But the very same people are now urging an American military assault on Iran explicitly to protect Israel and to preserve its nuclear monopoly in the Middle East. Their advocacy is fully coordinated with the Government of Israel. No one in the region wants a nuclear-armed Iran, but Israel is the only country pressing Americans to go to war over this.

Finally, the need to protect Israel from mounting international indignation about its behavior continues to do grave damage to our global and regional standing. It has severely impaired our ties with the world's 1.6 billion Muslims. These costs to our international influence, credibility, and leadership are, I think, far more serious than the economic and other burdens of the relationship.

Against this background, it's remarkable that something as fatuous as the notion of Israel as a strategic asset could have become the unchallengeable conventional wisdom in the United States.

Perhaps it's just that, as someone once said, "people...will more easily fall victim to a big lie than a small one." Be that as it may, the United States and Israel have a lot invested in our relationship. Basing our cooperation on a thesis and narratives that will not withstand scrutiny is dangerous. It is especially risky in the context of current fiscal pressures in the United States. These seem certain soon to force major revisions of both current levels of American defense spending and global strategy, in the Middle East as well as elsewhere. They also place federally funded programs in Israel in direct competition with similar programs here at home. To flourish over the long term, Israel's relations with the United States need to be grounded in reality, not myth, and in peace, not war.



**“BASING OUR COOPERATION ON A THESIS AND NARRATIVES THAT  
WILL NOT WITHSTAND SCRUTINY IS DANGEROUS.”**



**“THE SINGLE GREATEST U.S. ACHIEVEMENT IN THE THIRD WORLD WAS TO TURN EGYPT FROM SOVIET ALLY TO AMERICAN PARTNER. IT WAS DONE IN LARGE PART THROUGH U.S.-ISRAEL RELATIONS.” –SATLOFF**

# OPEN DEBATE

*Edited questions and responses by Freeman and Satloff*

*Chas, how do you evaluate your strategic argument against the historic, moral, and democratic arguments in favor of a strong alliance with Israel? And Rob, do you think that—given the almost international unanimity on the subject of settlements, including settlements in Jerusalem—Israel’s policy of continuing to impinge on Palestinian territory is a strategic advantage to the United States?*

**FREEMAN:** I think the moral and democratic arguments are in fact very compelling. They’re very strong, and it is not the case that values are irrelevant to American foreign policy. Values, however, will not sustain a relationship that is not built on interests. Values charge interests with intensity, but interests, in the end, sustain relationships.

What is the consequence of that here? If, in fact, there are strong moral reasons for maintaining a relationship with Israel, which I accept, and if democracy is important, which I also accept, then this is an argument to try to make Israel a strategic asset, rather than the liability that it is. How do you do that? You make peace. I don’t think there is a serious effort to make peace now under way, and there has not been for a very, very long time.

A final point, a caution: Israel is becoming considerably less democratic and considerably less tolerant, not only of people of Muslim or Christian faith but also of Jews who are secular, who do not conform to a very orthodox view of Judaism. If this process continues, the argument for a community of value between the United States and Israel or between Israel and the Jewish diaspora becomes increasingly hard to sustain.

**SATLOFF:** As Chas pointed out, from the 1940s to the 1960s, this was a values-only relationship. We weren’t Israel’s strategic partner, the French were. This all began to change after the 1967 war and especially during the 1973 war. Why?

Because Israel showed that, even without us, it was strong and could do important and good things; it could beat our adversary. Then, people in various parts of the U.S. government began to take notice and say, “My gosh, this plucky little country actually is a big power. Maybe we could turn it to our advantage.”

Now, it wasn’t just an oddity of the Cold War that did this in 1974. During the Cold War, the single greatest U.S. achievement in the Third World was to turn Egypt from Soviet ally to American partner. It was done in large part through U.S.-Israel relations. The strength of this relationship convinced the Egyptians that there was no sense in fighting; that it had better make peace. And the strength of that relationship is essential if a broader peace is to emerge.

The Arab parties and, in the future, Iran will only make peace with Israel once they have been convinced that efforts to annihilate Israel are foolish. America has an interest in bringing about that development—in getting Arab states, Arab parties, and other Muslim states to reject the idea of war and accept the idea of peace.

Now, am I going to defend the settlement policy? Is it in America’s strategic interests that Israeli settlers go out to Nablus and Jenin? Of course not. But that is precisely what the peace process is designed to remedy: disputes between our ally, Israel, and, in this case, our budding partner, the Palestinian Authority. After a year of walking around with our blinders on, we have realized that Israeli-Palestinian negotiations—not U.S.-Israel debates—are the way to solve the settlement dispute. That’s been the historic pattern on Israeli-Arab problems since 1979.

It is impossible to say that this process has not achieved any results, that the Israel-Egypt peace

treaty is perhaps not the single greatest American achievement, or that maintaining it for thirty-six years is the single greatest American achievement in this part of the world. While nobody thought it would be possible, it was, and it made possible all sorts of strategic advantages throughout the region in the last three decades.

So, no, it's not an advantage to us, but we have a process to address it.

*Rob, a number of incidents over the last six or seven months have troubled friends of Israel: Operation Cast Lead, which killed so many Palestinian civilians; the flotilla incident, which killed nine people; the incident in Dubai, which captured the Mossad killing a member of Hamas on camera. Given these events, are there now increasing restraints on Israel's ability to use massive force against its adversaries? And, are you concerned about the perception that supporters of Israel, particularly of right-wing Israeli policies, are egging on the United States toward military action against Iran?*

**SATLOFF:** Objectively, there are more constraints on the ability to operate freely in the service of one's national security today than there were two or three decades ago. However, it's ironic that on the one hand, Americans like to see Israel win convincingly. We liked seeing Israel defeat its enemies in 1967, destroy Iraqi nuclear programs, and succeed in Entebbe, Uganda. But we bemoan the blemishes on Israel's moral character when Israel is forced to operate under the glare of international scrutiny in Gaza and forbids itself from operating, for example, the way the United States may be operating in other parts of the world with fewer satellite televisions and less scrutiny. Well, we can't have it both ways.

In terms of your second question, let's follow the line of thought. Chas said the Iraq war was instigated in the United States by people who were friends of Israel—he didn't say by Israel—and that these same people are instigating for military action against Iran today. This is a very subtle

variation of a more conventional theme (one promoted by Stephen Walt and John Mearsheimer)—that Israel was responsible for the Iraq war. In fact, the government of Israel specifically warned the United States against fighting the Iraq war and advocated focusing on Iran. We didn't take their advice. So, the idea that they control our decisionmaking or that their friends in America control it is clearly not proven by the facts.

Now, today, who supports a more assertive American policy on Iran? According to most

**“WELL OVER 56% OF THE AMERICAN PUBLIC [SUPPORT A MORE ASSERTIVE AMERICAN POLICY ON IRAN]... THIS IS A COMMON ISSUE SHARED BY ALL FRIENDS OF SECURITY AND STABILITY IN THE MIDDLE EAST.” –SATLOFF**

recent Gallup polls, it is well over 56 percent of the American public. Are friends of Israel among those? Yes. Is the ambassador from the United Arab Emirates among those? Yes. Are Arab diplomats among them? Yes. This is not an Arab-Israeli issue. This is a common issue shared by all friends of security and stability in the Middle East.

**FREEMAN:** The fact is that I didn't make the argument; it has been explicitly recognized that Israel advocated for the Iraq war. However, I did argue that while coordination between people in Israel and people here in pressing for the Iraq war was

unclear, there is no such lack of clarity in the case of Iran. It is fully coordinated; it is out in the open. We know what it is and that it is, in fact, justified to defend *Israel* against the threat. Iran poses no direct threat to the United States. No one else in the region, including the United Arab Emirates (UAE), thinks that Iran's nuclear program (if it really has one, which I think it does) is aimed at the UAE or other Arabs. We need to be a little realistic here.

*I think there's a growing consensus that the Oslo-generated two-state solution is receding. If it actually dies, and Israel comes to control the West Bank in a one-state solution, is there any circumstance under which Dr. Satloff thinks we shouldn't have a special relationship with Israel? Or, would the special relationship with Israel become problematic?*

**SATLOFF:** First of all, a little history: the two-state solution was first proposed by Britain in 1937. It was accepted by the Zionist movement at that time, and ever since then, the leaders of the State of Israel, with brief periods of exception, have



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accepted it. It is eighty-three years old and still has a very, very long life ahead of it. If you give me a dime every time someone says, "Within two years the two-state solution will be history," I'll be a very wealthy man.

Now, if Arab parties, in this case the Palestinians, refuse to negotiate with the Israelis for many, many more years, there won't be a two-state solution. That's almost self-evident, but it would not, in my view, derogate any of the strategic benefits.

Thankfully, wiser heads, I'm quite confident, are going to prevail. For example, Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas's reason for being is to represent diplomacy as an option to achieve Palestinian national rights, as opposed to Hamas, whose reason for being is to represent violence and terrorism as the way to achieve Palestinian national rights. When we clear away the haze, the Palestinian Authority will come back to the table, because otherwise, it has no reason for being. Hopefully wiser people will reach strategic compromise and we will in fact have real progress on this front.

**FREEMAN:** I suggest that everybody read the Likud Party platform. It flatly rules out any Palestinian state west of the Jordan River, so I'm not sure what acceptance of two states is, or where it is evidenced in policy. More to the point, it is somewhat problematic that Hamas was elected in what everyone thought were free and fair elections in 2006 and that since then we have been engaged in an effort of various phases to ensure that it is starved out of government and discredited.

We have a problem here, in terms of promoting democracy, which has been evidenced in the Palestinian context and, I would argue, more broadly in American policy in the region. I don't see how Israel's democracy—at least for Jews, it's a full democracy—leads to a major advantage for the United States in the region as a whole. I think it's a very complex question.

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**SATLOFF:** Israel is on record—at the UN Security Council, in cabinet resolutions, and in public speeches—in support of a two-state solution. On Hamas, the key issue is not democracy but whether the United States should apply the same requirements for diplomatic engagement that we applied to the Palestine Liberation Organization before 1988: recognition of Israel, renunciation of violence, commitment to diplomacy as a means to resolve conflict. It’s the Palestinians’ decision to elect Hamas, but we do not have to engage with them. We can choose to apply the same requirements, and that’s what we’re doing. This isn’t, somehow, antidemocratic, this is an advance of America’s interest.

In terms of Israel as an example to Middle Easterners of democracy, just ask Jordanians, Palestinians, people who watch Israeli television, ask them what they see. They see government ministers being felled by the Israeli attorney general. They see debates on TV that make debates on Capitol Hill look like a birthday party. They see real live democracy. They see Arab legislators standing up and representing all of their constituents. It is not, of course, a perfect democracy, but

among the other twenty-odd states in the region, there is no comparable democracy.

*If the American government were to accept the view of Israel as a liability, what would it do, in concrete terms?*

**FREEMAN:** I think that government would try to turn Israel into an asset, which would mean redoubling efforts toward peace. At the moment, Israel really has no incentive to change its behavior, because there are no consequences for continuing to annex land, expand settlements, squeeze out Palestinians, expel people, and take all the other actions that are incompatible with the two-state framework it allegedly accepted. Without consequences, Israelis don’t have to make choices, so they do whatever is most expedient. It’s extremely dangerous for Israel in the long term, in terms of both the character of Israeli society and the surrounding security environment, and it has become very dangerous for the United States.

When the Obama administration took office, I think the president actually recognized this. I think it explains his major effort to recalibrate relations with the Muslim world and to start a process in which Israel would make decisions that lead to some mutually agreed coexistence with the Palestinians.

We should very much want Israel to come to an agreement with the Palestinians, and Hamas has to be part of that package because of the group’s electoral support. We should be trying to create a context for Israel in which—if it does not do that—it pays some price in terms of American support, although not in terms of a withdrawal of American support.

*What would be the first thing, specifically?*

**FREEMAN:** It would be to put teeth in the “no settlements” policy, for one thing.

*Would you cut American aid to Israel?*

**FREEMAN:** Yes, on a contingency basis. If Israel actually showed seriousness of purpose in discussions, then that should be reflected. The fact is that Israel is vastly superior militarily to everyone in the region, and it has to reach out as far as Iran to find a threat with any credibility at all—though I don't think it has much credibility—but that justifies a hugely militarized society, a lot of which is paid for by the American taxpayers. I think it would be perfectly legitimate to adjust that level of support in order to induce better behavior. We have leverage, and I think we ought to use it.

*What about passing laws that would make it more difficult for Israeli business and military sales?*

**FREEMAN:** Not necessarily, but Israeli companies have privileges in defense procurement that exceed many of those available to French or British companies, for example, and those privileges should be on the table. We should have the ability to use that leverage.

The Obama administration just announced that only Israel can determine what it needs, what it wants, what it should get, from the United States in the military sphere. We don't defer that sort of authority to any other country.

So, I think there are many, many things that we could do—consistent with broad support for Israel, its prosperity, and its strong relationship with the United States—to help Israelis recognize that they do have to make choices. They are going to have to, in the long run, make peace with their neighbors, and we should be trying to help them do that, not depriving them of a reason to even consider those choices.

**SATLOFF:** On Israel cultivating relationships with its neighbors and bearing no costs, let's look at two examples. Israel withdrew totally and completely from territory in Lebanon in the year 2000, cultivating a relationship with its neighbors. What filled the vacuum? Hizballah—imposing a significant threat to Israel's north. Israel withdrew completely and totally from Gaza, and what

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filled the vacuum? Hamas—dedicated to Israel's destruction, opposed to the Palestinian authority, and opposed to any negotiated settlement of this conflict. Yes, there are costs, but is there another country in this arena that had thousands of short-range missiles falling on its citizens? For this, the United States does provide special economic support to help achieve a short-range radar.

Progress on peace is only possible when Israelis feel confident that they can take risks for peace. If, as you suggest, the United States began to realign and started by penalizing Israel as it made this policy decision, it would end up penalizing the security relationship. The Israelis would lose confidence in America's sponsorship of this process and the confidence that they can take

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significant risks for peace. The strength of the U.S.-Israel relationship is an absolute prerequisite for that process and for peace.

**FREEMAN:** The only time that we actually made progress on the Israeli-Palestinian front was after the first Bush administration suspended housing guarantees for Israel and did exactly what I'm suggesting. Without questioning the overall relationship, the United States made it clear that good and bad decisions would have consequences. Second, Hizballah was the child of the Israeli occupation in Lebanon, not the result of Israeli withdrawal. The idea that somehow Hizballah, which was hiding in Lebanon, was an existential threat to Israel is fairly preposterous. And finally, Israel didn't withdraw from Gaza; it put it under siege. It took soldiers out, but it surrounded the place, and in the words of one of its prominent politicians, it's been trying to put Palestinians on a severe diet so that they mend their evil ways. This is not an act of generosity that requires reciprocity. There is an Arab leader in the region, whose advice I treasure, who once advised Israel that if it wanted to be loved, it should do something loveable. Not bad advice.

*Could you provide an example of a weapons program that was developed in Israel that is of strategic use to the United States?*

**SATLOFF:** I'm no expert in this field, but people tell me, for example, to look at unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs). Israel has been the world leader in UAV technology on which we now rely, for better or for worse, in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region and elsewhere.

**FREEMAN:** I think we have benefited from Israeli UAV developments; it's just as well, because we paid for them. They could have been developed in New Jersey, but they weren't. They were developed in Israel. The UAVs we use on our own battlefields are U.S.-developed, by the way, not Israeli.

**SATLOFF:** That's a facetious reply, because they weren't going to be developed in New Jersey. The Israelis wanted to develop them to address their own particular security constraints.

*Rob, if—as you admitted—these settlements are not only internationally odious but also not to America's strategic advantage, don't we as a country have a right to do exactly what Chas said and send a message by controlling the amount of aid we give to Israel, depending on how and if they act in our strategic interest?*

**SATLOFF:** The record on this is pretty clear. When the Israelis reach diplomatic agreement with their partners, and the agreements stipulate the dismantling of settlements, the Israelis dismantle settlements. They

did this with the Egyptians and unilaterally with the Gazans, and this is what is envisioned with the Palestinians.

But the topic of the panel is to what extent this issue really has an impact on the strategic asset or liability status of Israel. I would argue, and we just heard Chas speak elegantly for quite a while, that there is not a single piece of evidence that the liability question has any relevance at all to matters of American international security such as the secure access to free-flow of oil, U.S.-Arab security cooperation, or U.S.-Arab participation in international enterprises. In contrast, I listed quite a few reasons on the asset side.

**FREEMAN:** It is very interesting to turn this into a question of liabilities. Suppose you ask the question: does Israel help the United States secure access to oil? I don't think so. Does Israel help the United States build good relations with the Muslim world? I don't think so. Does Israel help the United States in areas of transit where Asia and Europe and Africa intersect? No. Does Israel finance U.S. foreign policy? No. Does Israel bring allies into the American embrace? No. Does Israel serve U.S. purposes in, say, its relations with China or South Africa? No. You might argue that the liabilities are more in the nature of opportunity costs than anything else, but you can't make the case for the assets.

**SATLOFF:** I am delighted that Chas agreed that whatever liabilities may exist are in the nature of opportunity costs and not in real costs.

Secondly, I disagree very much with Chas's denigration of the assets. The fact is that a strong Israel, based on the U.S.-Israel relationship, has brought peace and stability to the Arab-Israeli arena. This includes American access to the Suez Canal. It includes stability from the Egyptian-Libyan border to the Syrian-Turkish border. This is a strategic bargain for us, an important asset, and adds to all the other benefits that I referred to earlier, from counterproliferation in Iraq and Syria to the sources of intelligence and technology that Israel provides with and for the United States.



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## PHOTO CAPTIONS AND CREDITS

- 1: American and Israeli flags wave as Israeli soldiers await the arrival of Vice President Dick Cheney in Jerusalem, March 18, 2002. (AP Photo/Elizabeth Dalziel)
- 2: Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Adm. Mike Mullen and Israeli chief of defense Lt. Gen. Gabi Ashkenazi salute during a ceremony welcoming Ashkenazi to the Pentagon, November 17, 2010. (Defense Department Photo/Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Chad J. McNeely)
- 4: The Israel Defense Forces crosses the Suez Canal, 1973. (State of Israel National Photo Collection)
- 7: King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia welcomes President Barack Obama upon his arrival in Riyadh, June 3, 2009. (AP Photo/Hassan Ammar)
- 8: Palestinians burn a U.S. flag during a demonstration protesting the establishment of Israel held in Nablus, the West Bank, May 15, 2008. (AP Photo/Majdi Mohammed)
- 10: Protesters burn a Star of David during a demonstration outside the Israeli consulate in Istanbul over the Gaza flotilla incident, May 31, 2010. (AP Photo/Ibrahim Usta)
- 13: An Israeli Navy soldier stands guard on a missile ship as other soldiers intercept several boats headed toward the Gaza Strip, May 31, 2010. (AP Photo/Uriel Sinai)
- 15: A Palestinian uses a slingshot to hurl stones at Israeli border police during clashes that erupted after a demonstration against Israel's Operation Cast Lead, January 2, 2009. (AP Photo/Maya Hitij)
- 16: Egyptian president Anwar Sadat, President Jimmy Carter, and Israeli prime minister Menachem Begin attend the formal ceremony of the Camp David Accords in Washington, D.C., March 26, 1969. (AP Photo)
- 19: Iran's Revolutionary Guard tests missiles, November 2, 2006. (AP Photo/Mehr News Agency, Sajjad Safari)
- 21: Palestinian prime minister Ismail Haniyeh from Hamas, left, shakes hands with President Abbas, following Abbas's speech during a special session of parliament in Gaza City, March 17, 2007. (AP Photo/Khalil Hamra)

