

The Future of U.S.-Israel Strategic Cooperation

May 2, 1996



Brief Analysis

On April 24, 1996, Shai Feldman, senior research fellow at the John F. Kennedy School of Government's Center for Science and International Affairs, presented the findings of his Washington Institute study [The Future of U.S.-Israel Strategic Cooperation \(templateC04.php?CID=46\)](#) at the Institute's Special Policy Forum. Zalmay Khalilzad, director of the Strategy and Doctrine Program, Project AIRFORCE, at the RAND Corporation, commented on Dr. Feldman's presentation. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

SHAI FELDMAN

The end of the Cold War and progress toward a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace has made the logic for U.S.-Israel strategic cooperation more compelling and the prospects for its expansion brighter than ever before. Indeed, this new regional environment will make the expansion of U.S.-Israel strategic cooperation easier, since the resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict (in the event of peace agreements with Syria and Lebanon) will reduce the likelihood of a negative Arab reaction to U.S.-Israel strategic cooperation. Strategic cooperation, however, should be strengthened within existing frameworks; elevating the frameworks to the level of a formal defense treaty may prove self-defeating.

Origins of U.S.-Israel Strategic Cooperation The original U.S. motivation for strategic cooperation with Israel was mainly political. The United States viewed Israel as an underdog nation -- in conflict with numerous Soviet-backed adversaries -- that shared the U.S. commitment to Judeo-Christian values, pluralist democracy, and human freedom. Domestic considerations also played a key role in encouraging Washington to seek close cooperation with Israel.

The United States, however, feared alienating its Arab allies by formalizing the U.S.-Israel strategic relationship and was concerned with technology leaks. From the Israeli perspective, although an alliance with the United State was congruent with David Ben Gurion's "grand strategy," Israel was concerned about losing its ethos of self-reliance and its nuclear edge. The threat of Soviet expansion in the Middle East and Israel's need for security against adversarial neighbors eventually led to the first U.S.-Israel Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) in 1979 and to a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) in 1981.

The New Regional Environment Although the regional context has changed -- the Soviet Union has crumbled and Israel is involved in bilateral and multilateral peace negotiations -- the rationale for building defense ties between Israel and the United States is stronger than ever before. Indeed, for the first time in Israel's history, Israel and the United States now face the same threats -- the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, terrorism, Islamic extremism, and the rogue regimes of Iran and Iraq.

Existing frameworks for U.S.-Israel strategic cooperation are well-designed and mutually beneficial; moreover, the disadvantages of a defense treaty outweigh the advantages. A "super-MOU" might be an appropriate middle-ground that would combine all MOUs and MOAs into a single document without requiring Congressional or Knesset ratification, but even such a formalized "constitution" of U.S.-Israel strategic cooperation might have its own bureaucratic drawbacks.

Existing frameworks could be utilized to enhance U.S.-Israel cooperation in many substantial ways. The United States and Israel could expand their cooperation on Persian Gulf security; pursue triangular cooperation with third parties such as Turkey; increase U.S. prepositioning of equipment in Israel; and pursue greater defense-industrial cooperation, including in the realm of anti-ballistic missile defense.

ZALMAY KHALILZAD

The United States remains committed to playing an active role in the Middle East, one of two potential areas of conflict in its two-MRC (major regional conflict) strategy. However, the United States will review its defense strategy next year. Growing isolationist sentiment and the uncertainty of friends and foes in the post-Cold War era may affect U.S. defense priorities.

The United States needs to find ways to adapt alliances in the region to new threats and security interests. In the past, there were tensions between the U.S. commitment to both the security of the GCC states and to its strategic partner, Israel. An important geo-political change in the security domain would be to transform these tensions into complementary policies by including both Jordan and Israel in GCC-based joint security programs, thereby spreading the burden of maintaining Gulf security.

In the present regional environment the United States needs Israel more than Israel needs the United States. Israel can assist U.S. efforts to enhance Gulf security and to counter threats from Iran and Iraq. Strengthening Israel-Jordan security relations are a key element of this effort. Other options the United States should investigate include basing U.S. equipment in Israel, such as bombers. This action would send a clear, potent signal to potential adversaries that the United States is a guarantor of the security of Israel and of the peace process in general.

The Future Strategic Environment Eventually, perhaps, the Arab-Israeli conflict will no longer be the defining feature of the region. Should that come to pass, it is in the best interest of the United States and Israel to reconfigure the region in terms of those who support peace and those who oppose it. The peace camp includes those countries with friendly ties to the United States and the West and that generally support pro-peace, pro-market, pro-status quo policies. The other camp seeks to undermine peace and the U.S. role in the Middle East. Therefore, a U.S. objective should be to encourage cooperation between Israel, Turkey, Jordan, Egypt, and the GCC states to expand the circle of peace while isolating and weakening the opposition.

All bilateral action is embedded in the regional context. Therefore, the extent to which the United States and Israel decide to formalize their strategic relationship depends on their cooperation with other regional states. European countries could also be incorporated into broad security arrangements. In the meantime, Israel should be factored into regional defense plans and incorporated into CENTCOM in recognition of the very real contribution it can make to the promotion of peace and stability throughout the Middle East.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Shira Vickar.

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