

The Future of U.S.-Israel Strategic Cooperation

May 1, 1996



In-Depth Reports

Executive Summary

In the 1970s, the establishment of U.S.-Israel strategic ties was driven less by America's perceived strategic imperatives than by political motivations: the values shared by the United States and Israel, the cultural proximity between the two societies, the unique role and influence of the American Jewish community, and the deep affinity felt by Israelis toward Americans. Indeed, the limits placed on U.S.-Israel strategic cooperation were equally political, rooted in Washington's reluctance to provoke negative Arab reactions. Yet the new Middle East environment -- especially the rapidly expanding Arab-Israeli peace process -- reduces the likelihood of negative Arab reactions to U.S.-Israel strategic cooperation. Hence, a golden opportunity now exists to expand the two countries' defense ties.

Meanwhile, Israel's role and standing in the region has been clearly transformed: from a struggling young democracy deserving direct and indirect U.S. economic and military assistance to a robust regional power capable of serving U.S. interests in the Middle East. In the latter sense, Israel's potential importance in America's eyes may increasingly resemble that of Turkey. Beyond the specific forms of assistance that Israel might be able to provide, this comparison points to the more general significance of Washington's association with a potent regional power. Joint exercises highlight this association, and the growing public exposure given to such exercises increase their deterrent effect. In addition, the prepositioning of U.S. arms and ammunition in Israel -- in some proximity to the sources of potential regional violence yet sufficiently distant from these sources and otherwise protected by a strong ally -- enhances U.S. deterrence in the Middle East.

Despite the anticipated expansion of Arab-Israeli peace, important parts of the Middle East will continue to comprise a rather hostile and violent neighborhood for both the United States and Israel. Hence, there is room for further improvement in strategic cooperation between the two countries as Israeli and U.S. forces stationed in the Middle East increasingly face the same set of potential threats: political and religious extremism, terrorism, and the proliferation of ballistic missiles and unconventional weapons.

U.S.-Israel defense ties stand a particularly good chance of blooming if the two countries attempt to inject greater content and substance into existing frameworks of strategic cooperation. In this context, the two countries might consider the following:

- Increased Israeli contribution to American contingency planning for possible U.S. military involvement to insure Gulf stability, as well as increased coordination of their general activities in the Gulf region and specific interactions with GCC states;
- Various forms of "triangular cooperation" -- with third parties such as Turkey -- designed to meet the three countries' objectives in the Middle East at large;
- Increased prepositioning of U.S. arms and ammunition in Israel designated for use by specific units of the U.S. armed forces in case of threats posed by Iraq and Iran;

- Further cooperation in addressing the threats entailed in the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East -- including the deployment and effective functioning of an Anti-Tactical Ballistic Missile (ATBM) system;
- Greater U.S.-Israel defense-industrial cooperation, including more frequent "teaming up" of Israeli and American defense firms in order to better compete in the international arms market.

Enhanced U.S.-Israel strategic cooperation does not require new frameworks. Yet the conclusion of a U.S.-Israel defense pact would clearly have a number of important advantages:

- Clarifying and formalizing America's commitment to Israel;
- Making U.S.-Israel "special relations" less reversible;
- Enhancing Israeli deterrence and thus providing an added hedge against a deterioration of the peace process.

Nevertheless, negotiating such a defense pact would also involve a number of drawbacks:

- It would erode the Israeli ethos of self-reliance and the positive impact that this has had on Israel's ability to mobilize its internal resources and on America's willingness to support Israel;
- It would be difficult to define against whom the treaty would be directed and under what circumstances it would be activated, particularly under conditions of an evolving Arab-Israeli peace process;
- It would embroil the U.S. and Israeli governments in a lengthy and potentially politically costly effort to gain ratification of such a treaty by the two countries' legislatures;
- It might raise the issue of nuclear proliferation in very stark terms -- possibly involving the U.S. government in a number of interrelated debates such as the applicability of its extended deterrence in the Middle East and the continued rationale of regarding Israel as a "special case" in U.S. nuclear non-proliferation policy.

A comparison of these advantages and drawbacks would seem to indicate that it would be wise for the U.S. and Israel to refrain from adopting a new "constitution" for their partnership and instead pursue enhanced strategic cooperation within existing frameworks.

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