

Between Two Administrations:

A U.S.-Israel Strategic Dialogue

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In-Depth Reports

President Reagan was motivated by a concern for Israel's security. He believed that we should commit ourselves to Israel's defense. He understood Israel's deep-seated and justified fear of attack and wanted to contribute to relieving it. Until Israel felt secure, he believed it unlikely that Israel would be willing to take the risks inherent in settling disputes with its Arab neighbors. As a separate matter, he also believed that the United States could benefit from contingent use of Israeli bases for defending its own interests in the Middle East. In such a contingency he did not expect that Israel would fight for the United States, although he did believe that we could reasonably expect Israel to take on some missions associated with the defense of the Eastern Mediterranean.

At the same time, President Reagan did not intend the relationship to be anti-Arab. Ultimately, he hoped to establish equivalent relationships with a number of Muslim countries, specifically Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Egypt. Had the United States made this approach clear to these states, the relationship with Israel could have been put on its intended course at the outset. The Pentagon believed, understandably, that an open-ended U.S.-Israeli pact would be seen as taking sides in the Arab-Israeli dispute.

Without such an explanation it is not surprising that "strategic cooperation" was not and is not understood and accepted by the U.S. military. On the central issue of political-military planning, the Joint Chiefs disagree with the president on the relative utility of Israel, compared to other states in the Middle East, as an ally in promoting and defending our mutual interests. If asked, the Joint Chiefs would say that U.S. interests in the Middle East are two-fold: denial of Soviet control of, and assured Western access to, oil reserves in the Arabian peninsula; and assured Western use of communication lines in the area.

With these interests defined, the Joint Chiefs would say that defending Middle East oil reserves against the Soviets is most easily accomplished from forward positions. Therefore, with the Iranian position foreclosed, the next best option is the Arabian peninsula. Toward this end, the Joint Chiefs would urge the adoption of measures that strengthen U.S. ties with the Persian Gulf states and the avoidance of actions that hinder the development of such relations.

The Joint Chiefs are neither cynical nor insensitive. They base their judgments on generally objective military analyses. They rely on civilian political leaders to introduce considerations that go beyond short-term military interests, such as alliances and ideological goals. To be fair to the Joint Chiefs, strategic cooperation with Israel has never been unambiguously explained by the president.

In Israel, the situation is roughly reversed. Israel's military leaders have had a very realistic understanding of how U.S. interests differ from Israel's and how, given those differences and the inevitable limits they impose, each side can still gain through well-defined programs of cooperation. Israel's political leaders, by contrast, have been unrealistic and occasionally self-serving in seeking to define the aims and limits of this new relationship.

The prospect of a new administration in each country presents a useful opportunity to redefine and clarify goals,

purposes and strategies. It is useful to start with fundamentals. A bipartisan consensus exists among those who have shaped, and will continue to shape, American national security policy. The priority for expending resources to defend our global interests is:

- * Deter nuclear war, the most potentially catastrophic threat to humankind;
- * Deter, with our allies, non-nuclear threats;
- * Assure, with our allies, collective access to resources and markets essential to our collective economic well-being;
- * Promote the spread of democracy through country-specific economic development and security assistance programs; and
- * Remain faithful to our moral and formal commitments to stamp out crimes against humanity.

Most objective analysts would agree that Israel has the ability to help solve problems in the second, third and fourth categories. As a democracy, Israel has fostered a scientific and engineering base that ranks among the best in the world. Its particular strength is its talent for innovation and discovery in technology and tactics. This talent should be exploited fully by the United States and applied to weapons systems for conducting low-intensity conflict.

Apart from its intellectual and scientific potential, Israel's geographic position vis-a-vis the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean warrants its inclusion in plans for a contingent response to Soviet operations in the region. Although the Joint Chiefs are correct in saying that terrain closer to the Persian Gulf would provide a more responsive and militarily sound defense of the peninsula's oil reserves, Israel is the closest the United States has been able to get since the fall of the shah.

As a democracy, Israel also provides stability and the predictability of long-term access. It is not as subject to the vicissitudes that accompany changing regimes in other Middle East countries. Commitments made by a Likud-dominated government are likely to be fulfilled by a successor Labor government.

The United States and all other civilized nations have a special interest in the security of Israel. For more than two millennia, Jews have been persecuted. On occasion, the United States has been a passive party to that persecution. No words in this essay nor in the volumes devoted to the history of the Jews can adequately capture the gravity of the sustained inhuman atrocity perpetrated against the Jews.

The new American president must tell his administration that the United States is unswerving in its commitment to the security of Israel. He must direct our military research, development, training and planning staffs to account for the full range of threats facing Israel.

Both Israel and the United States want a future without the constant threat of war. Soon, easily obtainable weapons technology will allow five countries in the region to obtain large supplies of long-range ballistic missiles armed with weapons of mass destruction. In 10 years, even the most powerful deterrent could be rendered irrelevant by an overwhelming pre-emptive strike. Steps must be taken to confront these emerging threats. Israel's military and aircraft companies should work closely with their American counterparts. Concurrently, a cabinet-level joint board should be formed to share information on our arms control history and doctrine of deterrence.

At best, however, these efforts can only delay catastrophe. Israel and the United States are committed to the idea that war is best prevented by resolving political disagreements. The pursuit of peace is the ultimate purpose of strategic cooperation. But it is here that fundamental questions are being raised. For nearly a generation, the United States and Israel have promoted the concept expressed in U.N. resolution 242. This calls for Israel's withdrawal from territories occupied in the 1967 Six Day War in exchange for an end to belligerency and the recognition of her sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence by the Arab states. But in recent months, Israel has resisted yielding any of the territory. While this is Israel's decision, there should be no misunderstanding that such a choice

would have profound consequences for Israel's relationship with the United States.

Conferences such as this can provide a useful forum for illuminating new directions in strategic cooperation. But we must also face the fact that while the U.S. commitment to Israel's security is enduring, there is an expectation of reciprocal good faith on fundamental positions. Any departure from them weakens the trust upon which the relationship is founded.

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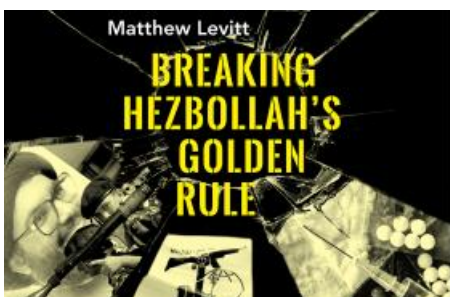
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