Strategy and Defense in the Eastern Mediterranean:

An American-Israeli Dialogue

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In-Depth Reports

In 1982 the United States deployed the Sixth Fleet off the shores of Lebanon in support of the Marines' ill-fated peacekeeping mission in that nation. In October 1985, carrier-based aircraft intercepted the hijackers of the Achille Lauro over the Eastern Mediterranean. In September 1986, the U.S. bombed Muammar Qaddaffi's headquarters in Tripoli with the help of carrier-based aircraft and naval units in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Until recently, the Eastern Mediterranean and its Middle Eastern littoral tended to be viewed by American military planners as compartmentalized regions requiring separate strategies for the protection of American interests. But as this record of the deployment of forces by the United States in recent years suggests, countering terrorism and radicalism in the Middle East depends in significant part on American capabilities in the Eastern Mediterranean.

The same is increasingly true of the relationship between the balance of power in the Middle East and the defense of American interests in the Eastern Mediterranean, particularly the protection of NATO's southern flank. Soviet access in wartime to Syrian and Libyan ports and air bases, for example, would significantly increase the threat posed to the Sixth Fleet. Conversely, American access to similar facilities in Morocco, Egypt and Israel would do much to counter such a threat. And beyond access to facilities is the role that the military capabilities of these Middle Eastern powers themselves might play in Eastern Mediterranean contingencies.

In the past, little attention has been given to this idea that the capabilities of Middle Eastern powers must be taken into account when planning for the defense of the Eastern Mediterranean. U.S. military planners tended to rely instead on the increasingly unstable arrangements with the NATO allies -- Turkey and Greece. In particular, little attention appears to have been given to Israel's role as an Eastern Mediterranean power capable of contributing to NATO's defense of that region.

Since November 1983, however, when President Reagan and Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir announced the establishment of the U.S.-Israel Joint Political Military Group, a serious effort has been undertaken to define areas of common interest where Israel can assist the United States. This new relationship, dubbed "strategic cooperation," has focused on the Eastern Mediterranean because it was here that the U.S. perceived a growing vulnerability and need.

The idea that Israel's formidable air and naval power -- to which the United States had made a substantial contribution -- could be utilized in the Eastern Mediterranean seems obvious. The fact that it was not seriously considered until 1983 is testimony to the compartmentalization that had developed in U.S. strategic planning. Put simply, Israel was perceived as a power capable of deterring conflict in the Middle East. Beyond that role, however, cooperation with Israel on the strategic level was regarded as something which might jeopardize already fragile strategic arrangements with friendly Arab states.

Indeed, even now, four years after the formal announcement of U.S.-Israel strategic cooperation, there is little public understanding of Israel's contribution to the defense of the Eastern Mediterranean. Commentators in the press and

analysts in the defense and foreign policy journals still tend to dismiss the development as something the United States is doing for Israel in response to domestic political pressures. The fact that the Sixth Fleet now makes regular port visits to Haifa, that carrier-based aircraft practice on Israeli firing ranges in the Negev desert, that joint anti-submarine warfare exercises have become a matter of routine, that U.S. and Israeli military planners meet every six months, and that U.S. material is now being prepositioned in Israel, all this seems to have gone unnoticed.

Ironically, it has not gone unnoticed by the Soviet Union and Syria. They are closely monitoring the development of strategic cooperation and their press commentators regularly express alarm and concern. In the rest of the Arab world, however, strategic cooperation has been greeted with silence. Indeed, our strategic relations with Egypt, Morocco, Saudi Arabia and Oman have been solidified at precisely the time that strategic cooperation with Israel was burgeoning.

The absence of protest from friendly Arab countries provides one explanation for the lack of public attention and understanding in the United States; the other explanation lies in the secrecy which surrounds the new relationship. Because both sides place a high value on strategic cooperation, neither has an interest in publicizing or politicizing it.

However, there is a need for greater public understanding, particularly in Washington, of the potential U.S.-Israel strategic cooperation holds for developments both in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East. For this reason, the Washington Institute for Near East Policy decided to help establish a strategic dialogue between the policy-making communities in Israel and the United States -- a public dialogue to reinforce the private dialogue already under way between the military planners of both countries.

This book is the result of that endeavor. It represents the proceedings of a Conference held in Jerusalem in July 1986 in which American and Israeli policy-makers, defense intellectuals, and national security correspondents discussed the threat environment in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East and the possibilities for U.S.-Israel strategic cooperation to meet the challenges to their common interest in stability.

It is an historic document, not only because it details the development of strategic cooperation between the United States and Israel, but also because it records the assessments of the American and Israeli defense communities of the strategic balance in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East in 1986.

In Part One, three American defense intellectuals provide a net assessment of Soviet capabilities and NATO vulnerabilities in the Eastern Mediterranean. Jim Roche -- a former senior policy planner for the Pentagon and the State Department- emphasizes the way in which the Middle Eastern littoral must impact on the thinking of U.S. military planners. Soviet involvement in Syria and Libya, for example, raises the distinct possibility that facilities in these client states could be used by the Soviet Union to threaten the sea lines of communication to Greece, Turkey and Italy, and to force the Turks to fight a four front war.

Moreover, Soviet access to air bases in these client states and to naval bases and "friendly shores" for its submarines, could severely hamper the operations of the Sixth Fleet and divert its scarce resources from other priority tasks. Roche's conclusion is clear: given NATO's limited resources, the United States can only counter these threats by depending upon "active" allies in the Middle East region.

Edward Luttwak -- a defense intellectual and adviser to the Pentagon -- reinforces this point by analyzing the particular vulnerabilities of Turkey and Greece and the relative decline in the ability of the Sixth Fleet to compensate for these weaknesses. He argues that Greece will do what it can to undermine NATO's deterrent capability in peacetime, but will fight in a crisis; whereas Turkey will make whatever contribution it can to deterrence but will quickly abandon NATO in the face of a real Soviet offensive. In these circumstances, Israel's ability to compensate for persistent NATO vulnerabilities on its southern flank becomes increasingly important to the United States.

Frank Fukuyama, a senior Soviet analyst at the Rand Corporation, argues, however, that the Kremlin is now in a stage of consolidation of empire, reflected in a decline in naval activity in the Eastern Mediterranean as well as in Third World activism more generally. This has held true for the Middle East, where an increase in Soviet arms supplies to Syria and Libya has been accompanied by a distancing of Moscow from its clients whenever there has been an increase in tensions and the possibility of a confrontation.

This suggests that the central balance in the Eastern Mediterranean is likely to be stable in the short term while the Soviet Union, under the leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev, concentrates on economic modernization and an improvement in relations with the United States.

But military planners must have longer-term horizons and, as Edward Luttwak points out: "regardless of the political orientation that may be dominant in Moscow, Soviet military power has been converted from what might be called an inventory of strength to a state of operationalized strength during the last two decades." Given that the trends in NATO's capabilities in the Eastern Mediterranean have tended to be in the opposite direction, the continued maintenance of stability there will depend on an enhanced deterrent capability -- something which U.S.-Israel strategic cooperation can help to supply.

Much the same conclusion can be reached about trends in the Middle Eastern regional balance considered in Part Two. As Aharon Yariv, head of the Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, argues in his strategic overview, the threat of immediate instability is only on the horizon in Lebanon -- an instability which is unlikely to spread unless other regional developments provoke a confrontation.

Emmanuel Sivan -- Professor of Islamic History at the Hebrew University -- is less sanguine about Islamic fundamentalism. He believes it is gaining a new lease on life in the Middle East as the revolution of rising expectations in the Arab world meets the reality of declining oil prices. While this resurgence is unlikely to topple the pro-Western regimes in Egypt or elsewhere, because of their ability to respond with both carrots and sticks, it does constrain them. This in turn reduces the willingness of threatened regimes to be closely identified with the United States or to be openly involved in the peace process with Israel.

If Islamic fundamentalism constrains the ability of pro-Western Arab regimes to contribute to stability, Syrian efforts to achieve "strategic parity" with Israel threaten to disrupt the Middle East balance altogether. Briefings for the conference participants by Israel's top political-military echelon revealed a serious concern that war with Syria was only a matter of time.

This assessment, however, was not entirely shared by three of Israel's most astute observers of Syria. Itamar Rabinovich, head of the Dayan Center for Middle East Studies at Tel Aviv University, explains in his presentation that Syria's President Hafiz al-Asad is only likely to launch war if he has considerable confidence in the outcome. He cannot have such confidence while Egypt remains at peace with Israel and the United States is engaged in strengthening its strategic relationship with the Jewish state.

But Amos Gilboa, former Deputy Chief Of Israeli Military Intelligence, argues that Asad's long term strategy is war and that diplomacy is only a means for preparing the best possible condition for that war while preventing any other Arab state from making peace. He agrees with Rabinovitch, however, that war is not a top Syrian priority at the moment. But, he asks, how long can a fundamentally weak country bear the burden of such a huge military buildup without launching a war?

Ze'ev Schiff, the military editor of Ha'aretz, explains just how serious the Syrian military buildup has become: four new army divisions, increased firepower, deployment of strategic missiles (with an alarming chemical warfare capability), the densest air defense system in the world, and an emphasis on airborne and commando units.

In weighing the Israel-Syria military balance and deciding whether to go to war, however, Syria's Asad must also take

into account developments on the Israeli side and the attitude of the United States. Will the U.S. prevent Israel from preempting his military buildup? Will Washington impose a ceasefire on Israel if he launches a war? Will the U.S. be willing to deprive Israel of any gains made in such a war? Little wonder, therefore, that commentaries in the Syrian press express great alarm at the visible dimensions of U.S.-Israel strategic cooperation: the six-monthly joint military planning talks; the joint exercises; and Israel's participation in the Strategic Defense Initiative.

At a minimum, these developments must produce a great deal of uncertainty in the mind of Hafiz al-Asad when he contemplates whether he has achieved "strategic parity" with Israel and whether the circumstances are propitious for war. U.S.-Israel strategic cooperation may have been developed because of American needs in the Eastern Mediterranean, but in this way, it has also served Israeli needs in terms of deterring Syria. It sends a signal to Damascus that Israel's qualitative edge in the military balance will not only be maintained but also enhanced by Israeli participation in the development of the next generation of American weapons systems. And it lets Asad know that if he starts a war, the United States will be standing behind its Israeli ally. Thus strategic cooperation enhances not only NATO's deterrence of the Soviet Union in the Eastern Mediterranean, but it also reinforces Israel's deterrence of Syria.

Preserving stability through deterrence in this volatile region of the world is the common interest upon which U.S.-Israel strategic cooperation has been based. In the final section of this book, three of the principle architects of this relationship explain the way in which this common interest was recognized and operationalized. This unique historical account, by policy-makers who participated in the process, serves to emphasize that strategic cooperation was not just developed as a new way to grant favors to Israel but was rather based on mutual needs and shared aspirations.

According to Israel's Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin, a common strategy for achieving peace in the Middle East developed in the wake of the 1967 Six Day War: the United States would only expect Israel to yield territory gained in that war in return for political accommodations with its neighbors. Military cooperation was first undertaken in 1970, when Washington, acting at King Hussein's request, sought Israel's assistance in overcoming a Syrian invasion of his kingdom. This established a second foundation for the strategic relationship: joint support for viable Arab regimes in the face of threats from subversive elements and radical states backed by the Soviet Union.

A third strategic foundation was established when Israel began providing the United States with intelligence data about the performance of Soviet weapons systems it was encountering on the Middle East battlefield. This too served mutual interests: the United States gained valuable intelligence not available elsewhere and Israel benefited from the consequent improvements in American weapons systems.

Yet these positive developments in strategic relations were essentially ad hoc in nature: born of a reaction to regional events rather than in anticipation of them. They served to demonstrate the mutuality of American and Israeli interests but did little to prepare the way for joint action.

This framework was established by President Reagan and Prime Minister Shamir in November 1983 in the form of the Joint Political Military Group (JPMG), whose assigned task was to examine ways to enhance cooperation through "combined planning, joint exercises, and...prepositioning of U.S. equipment in Israel."

Sam Lewis, the U.S. Ambassador to Israel at the time this announcement was made, and Mendi Meron, the Israeli military attache in Washington and subsequently the director general of the Israeli Ministry of Defense, provide an American and Israeli perspective on what lay behind this simple statement announcing the establishment of the JPMG.

Lewis explains that the first attempt to establish a formal framework -- the Memorandum of Understanding signed in 1981 -- failed because Washington, at the time, tended to regard strategic cooperation as a gift for Israel rather

than something from which both sides would benefit, while at the same time, Israel's plans for cooperation were far more extensive than anything the U.S. military establishment had begun to consider.

Lewis and Meron explain that two years later the United States-tied down and vulnerable in Lebanon and disappointed by the lack of support from friendly Arab regimes-had changed its attitude, while Israel had decided to concentrate only on areas where the United States felt it needed help. Both sides agreed to start the process without mandated goals and without trying to spell out ahead of time the parameters of the strategic relationship; and the military participants in the JPMG persuaded their political masters that the issue was too important to be publicized or politicized.

Three years later, the approach adopted by both sides has been vindicated. As the chronology in the Appendix shows, the United States and Israel have managed to identify many areas of mutual benefit in the strategic arena. Strategic cooperation, moreover, has helped stabilize both the regional military balance in the Middle East and the central balance between East and West in the Eastern Mediterranean. And while it is certain that the long term trends are less reassuring, what emerges from these deliberations is that by working together on the strategic level, Israel and the United States can do much to protect each other from the deleterious effects of these trends. Indeed, in the short time since this conference was held, both Syria and the Soviet Union appear to have changed their strategic policies and adopted, at least for the moment, less belligerent attitudes; U.S.-Israel strategic cooperation has played a crucial role in these changes.

To convert such changes into more lasting arrangements of peace and stability is a much more difficult task, as Prime Minister Shimon Peres shows in his concluding remarks. But without a stable deterrent balance, such peacemaking efforts would not be possible. That is the most important contribution that U.S.-Israel strategic cooperation can make to the interests of both countries and the world...

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