

Back to the Basics of Shared Values in the US-Israel Relationship

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Articles & Testimony

Because Netanyahu's main objectives on Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the Abraham Accords all depend on U.S. support, he also needs a workable policy toward the Palestinians—but his coalition partners are threatening this tenet.

Recently, I was asked whether I might consider revising the book I wrote on the US-Israeli relationship entitled *Doomed to Succeed* (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/doomed-succeed-us-israel-relationship-truman-obama-0>). Turmoil in Israel, the most right-wing, religious government in Israel's history, and President Biden's decision to hold off inviting Prime Minister Netanyahu to Washington led to concerns about where the relationship might be headed, and thus the suggestion to revise the book.

In *Doomed*, I analyzed and evaluated the key assumptions that drove policies in every American administration from Truman to Obama. The sense of irony in the title grew out of the reality that had emerged in the relationship: regardless of the mistakes either or both of us might make, the fundamentals of shared values and shared interests had come to ensure we would always find a way to right the ship and manage our ties successfully. The American-Israeli relationship was special, but it had not always been so.

Our relations were not special until Ronald Reagan's presidency—even though John Kennedy broke the taboo on providing Israel arms in 1962 and Richard Nixon ordered a massive air and sealift of weapons to Israel during the 1973 war. Kennedy had to overcome the determined opposition of the State Department and the intelligence community, each arguing that the US would see its relations with the Arabs collapse if we provided Hawk anti-aircraft missiles to Israel. (In reality, the Arabs largely ignored the sale—with Saudi Arabia's putative leader at the time, Crown Prince Faisal, meeting Secretary of State Dean Rusk the same day the sale became known and never raising it with either Rusk or a week later in his meeting with the president. Faisal was focused instead on a pro-

Nasser coup in Yemen and wanted American support, including F-5 sales.)

Nixon held off providing any arms to the Israelis for the first week of the 1973 war, in part because he was sensitive about the possible Arab response and in part because he and Henry Kissinger believed that a military stalemate would provide a basis to launch diplomacy. (He would reverse the withholding of arms eight days into the war when the Soviets and Egyptians walked back their willingness to support a UN Security Council resolution calling for a ceasefire in place—and Nixon decided that he was not going to permit Soviet arms to defeat American arms in that war.)

Mistaken assumptions guided US policies for a long time—to wit, it was assumed in much of the national security bureaucracy that distancing from Israel would produce gains with the Arabs and cooperating with Israel would cost us with them. Neither was ever true. Indeed, distancing from Israel as Dwight Eisenhower did during his administration, and especially during and after the Suez War, not only bought us little with the Arab governments but our position, as John Kennedy observed at the outset of his presidency, was worse in the Middle East after the Eisenhower Administration than before.

Similarly, Richard Nixon suspended F-4 fighters to Israel in 1970, believing this would gain favor with Egyptian President Nasser—and Nasser pocketed this and moved closer to the Soviets. (Some argue that the 1973 oil embargo was proof of the cost of supporting Israel. But the Saudis had their own reasons to gain more control over the price of oil, and in any case, they lifted it by March of 1974, even though Syria's Hafez al-Assad was asking them not to do so and even though the Saudis had said they would not lift it until Israel withdrew to the June 4, 1967 lines.)

There was one basic reason these two inter-related assumptions proved wrong: the non-radical Arab leaders were focused on their security and survival and they were never going to make their relationship with us dependent on what we did with Israel. When we see Arab leaders hedging today, it is driven much more by their doubts about whether the US will be there in the crunch for them. For a long time, even quiet ties with Israel were sought because many Arab leaders felt it would help them in and with Washington.

When *Doomed* was published in 2015, the tensions between President Barack Obama and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu may have meant Israel was no longer a good channel to the US. But Israel at that point was attractive for its own reasons, for what it could provide in security and non-security areas. The less reliable the Americans were perceived to be, the more attractive the Israelis became. But that was also a time when the Israeli focus on Iran mirrored that of many in the region—and as one Saudi official said to me, “the Israelis make the argument against the Iranians in Washington better than we do.”

Notwithstanding the tensions in the relationship during the Obama Administration, it was Obama who would decide to renew a 10-year military assistance package to Israel totaling \$38 billion. (Speaking of ironies, Donald Trump, who is seen as a great supporter of Israel, simply continued the Obama package without any additions. Meanwhile, Israel incurred greater costs operationally as Trump withdrew from the Iran nuclear deal and Israel also felt the need to blunt Iran's efforts to embed itself in Syria and provide precision guidance for the rockets it gave to Hezbollah.)

In the conclusion to *Doomed*, I suggested that upheaval in the Middle East would lead the US to continue to rely on Israel. Its stability was the result of being the only democracy in the region, and those who threatened Israel also threatened us. I tempered that conclusion by flagging a number of developments that could shake the relationship. If Israeli right-wing governments weakened the supreme court, passed illiberal laws, continued to build West Bank settlements outside of the bloc areas, making separation from Palestinians and two states impossible, there would be problems, especially as these raised basic questions about one of the essential pillars of the relationship—shared values. While I did not flag the problem we see today with American progressives, I did say that the US demographic changes and the rise of minorities with no history or ties to Israel meant that Israel should develop a well-designed

strategy of explaining itself to these communities.

Since we are seeing some of the very problems I had flagged in 2015, am I concerned about the relationship? Should the current problems lead me to retitling the book?

Of course, I have concerns, but I also see fundamental enduring strengths of the relationship because Israel is a vibrant democracy. A large segment of Israel's public sees the attempt to reform or overhaul the judicial system as a threat to democracy. The Levin-Rothman judicial reform package has provoked a backlash that is extraordinary in no small part because Israelis perceive it as designed to end judicial independence—the only break or limitation on power in a parliamentary system where the Knesset serves as an extension of the executive branch of government, not a check on it. Polls show that 70% of the population want the Levin-Rothman legislation suspended, favor a dialogue and want a compromise.

The demonstrations have been unprecedented in size, the spectrum of who is involved, their staying power, and the public's clear determination to safeguard Israel's democracy. Those who have never demonstrated are doing so because of their perception of the stakes. Military reservists from elite combat units and the air force are protesting and saying they will not report for training. The broad consensus of Israeli leaders in business, finance, health, education, and the labor unions is unprecedented, and their call for a general strike ultimately led Prime Minister Netanyahu to call a pause. If nothing else, the spontaneous response to the reported firing of Defense Minister Yoav Gallant, because he publicly said he could not be a party to a process that was tearing the country as well as the military apart, signaled the depth of what is a grassroots movement.

Most Israelis would agree that the judicial sector is in need of reform if for no other reason than it lacks diversity, at times has over-reached, and the wheels of justice grind far too slowly. Prime Minister Netanyahu might have avoided the upheaval and the emergence of a remarkable grassroots movement if he had announced at the beginning of his sixth term that reform was needed in the judiciary and to that end he was naming a panel of experts from every segment of society to make recommendations and those recommendations would be considered later in the year. Instead, the decision of the new government to simply press ahead and impose its version of reform produced a domestic backlash that caught the Netanyahu government by surprise.

The prime minister has now paused the legislative process, and both the government and opposition are engaging in a dialogue under the auspices of President Herzog. It is still too early to know if there will be a compromise that ends this crisis. Common sense may argue for it, but the protests took on a life of their own and it will not be so easy to calm the mood they have unleashed. Protestors are riveted not only on the judicial issue, but also on other draft laws the governing coalition are seeking to pass that they perceive as trying to impose the values of the ultra-Orthodox on Israel's secular society.

None of this is taking place in a vacuum. Hezbollah and Iran seem to read the Israeli domestic upheaval as a sign of weakness. Hassan Nasrallah is again saying Israel will not survive. And Nasrallah is not limiting himself to threatening words. He has recently pushed at least one act of terrorism in Israel which fortunately failed in its attempt to cause a mass casualty event. What if the attack had succeeded in killing many Israelis? That could have easily escalated into a conflict, and rather than deepening the domestic crisis, it might well produce a closing of the ranks in Israel at least for the time being. Would the US not be drawn to supporting Israel? The answer is almost certainly yes.

Similarly, with Ramadan and Passover converging this year, what happens if Palestinian acts of terror—promoted by Hamas, Islamic Jihad and Iran—increase while Israeli security interventions lead to increasing Palestinian deaths? Will there be an explosion of violence? How will that affect the current turmoil in Israel? Military reservists raised their concerns about the government after Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich called for the Palestinian village of

Huwara in the West Bank to be erased after two Israelis were killed as they drove through the town. His subsequent apology rang hollow for many, especially after he said in a subsequent speech that there was no such thing as a Palestinian people.

The Palestinian issue has the potential to create fissures between the US and Israel. A majority of Americans still favor Israel but the younger demographic, especially among Democrats, takes a more critical view of Israel and sees the Palestinians as victims. The Palestinians surely are victims, but that should not excuse the Palestinian leaders' own contributions to this status: rejecting credible offers that would have produced a Palestinian state such as the Clinton parameters; delivering very poor governance whether in the Palestinian Authority or under Hamas in Gaza; and furthering corruption and division that also robs the Palestinian Authority of basic legitimacy.

For Israel's part, policies that look like annexation will cost it with us and with those Arab countries that are part of the Abraham Accords. Netanyahu wants a breakthrough with Saudi Arabia and a deepening of the Abraham Accords; he will probably need American help with both, and it may be forthcoming if his policies toward the Palestinians are designed to keep the possibility of two states alive. Already he is finding that the language of his far-right coalition partners is producing a go-slow approach among the Abraham Accord countries—they won't walk away from their peace agreements, but they will do little to advance them as well. The Arab states also count on Israel to be stable, and signs that it may not be so also give them a reason to hedge bets.

Ultimately, the problem for the prime minister is that his main foreign policy objectives on Iran, Saudi Arabia, and deepening and expanding the Abraham Accords require smart management of the Palestinian issue and a posture that does not preclude two states later on. He has coalition partners who make that difficult and seem to have a different agenda. They may also pose another problem for him: they raise the very issue of shared values which has been and will remain the essential pillar of the US-Israel relationship.

Dennis Ross is the counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute. This article was originally published on the Jerusalem Strategic Tribune website (<https://jstribune.com/ross-back-to-the-basics/>). ❖

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